# DEVI

## The Bandit Queen

Richard Shears & Isobelle Gidley

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After being tortured and raped for 23 days by the killers of her bandit lover, a young Indian woman set out on a path of revenge. Phoolan Devi – Goddess of Flowers – escaped from her captors and formed her own band of 'dacoits', masterminding a massacre on St. Valentine's Day which ended in the deaths of 20 villagers. Never before in Indian history had so many high caste Hindus died at the unclean hands of their inferiors.

From that day, Devi was on the run, fostering a violent and romantic legend, robbing from the rich to give to the poor. Hiding in snake-infested ravines, she eluded capture for two years despite police ambushes and gun battles which left many dead. She became revered as one who had cast off oppression and had resurrected a mythical golden age when women were free from the restraints of Hinduism. Married against her will at the age of 11 to an old man who already had a wife, Devi finally ran away with a group of bandits whose leader was to become her lover. During her reign as the Dacoit Queen, police put a large reward on her head, but despite many attempts to capture her she always managed to shoot her way to freedom.

Now the running is over. Phoolan Devi sits in jail awaiting trial for murder after a dramatic surrender ceremony when, dressed in a khaki uniform and a red bandanna, she handed over her rifle to a government minister and kissed his feet.

# DEVI

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DEAD

# Acknowledgements

The authors are extremely grateful to a large number of people in the villages of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh as well as in Delhi, Gwalior and Bhopal for the valuable information and background material they provided. We have respected their wishes and kept them anonymous for one of two reasons: they fear reprisals from dacoits or, in the case of officials, a rap on the knuckles from their superiors. We are particularly grateful to a number of mediators and to those officials who gave up their time to talk to us. Special thanks are also due to our friend in the yellow sandals in Gwalior. We would also like to thank the staff of the library of International House, New Delhi, where we carried out much background research. In Sydney, John Ruegg spent many hours helping with translations.

# Prologue

She was known as Dasyu Sundari—Beautiful Robber.

Within two years, Phoolan Devi had risen from a poor village girl to become Queen of the Bandits. Her exploits became legendary throughout the Indian sub-continent and were reported in newspapers around the world. Millions saw her as a freedom fighter. As many hated and feared her.

'Legend invests them (dacoits) with a kind of Robin Hood romance. Female dacoits (bandits) are even more exalted. They do not just rob the rich to feed the poor; by defying the law, they restore to womanhood the respect and dignity that Indians believe women enjoyed in a remote golden age of uncluttered Hinduism,' reported Sunanda Datta-Ray in the *Observer* Magazine.

*The Times*, London, said of her: 'Her career as terrorist, kidnapper and killer in the maze of ravines and jungle wilderness of north central India has been the very stuff of headlines and popular chronicles.'

The *Los Angeles Times* reported: 'In any history of the world's notorious outlaws, Phoolan Devi would need a chapter all her own.'

'Phoolan,' said India's *Probe* magazine, '... unlike most rural women, refused to give in to age-old oppressive social norms. She protested against the abuse of her body and the snatching of her father's land. What is amazing is that after living in dense jungles for nearly 36 months and after being on the run from the police of two states, she shows no mental fatigue.'

In *India Today* it was written that '... her strange and fascinating saga will remain alive ... as a reflection of the primitive and contemporary colliding in human nature and Indian society'.

The *Hindustan Times* called her 'the dreaded scourge of the badlands'.

And in London's *Sunday Telegraph* she was described as 'the husky-voiced, boyish-looking Phoolan who operated from craggy, snake infested ravines ... with a reputation rivalling that of legendary 1950s bandit, Queen Putli—the Doll'.

She featured in the German magazine, *Merian*, and in Australian newspapers. Whenever Phoolan Devi moved, it seemed, the world heard of it.

# PART I

# CHAPTER ONE

EAST OF BHIND on the night of December 5, 1982, two men on a motorcycle headed towards the ravines. A mist had fallen and it was bitterly cold.

Superintendent Rajendra Chaturvedi was shivering. He had put on a roll-neck sweater but realised he should have worn a shawl and gloves as well. Behind, his passenger trembled against him.

The man tapped him on the shoulder.

'*Baen phiro!* Turn left!'

'*Achchha!* OK!'

The officer swerved off the main road and bumped down a track. He could see only a few yards in front and had almost missed the turning. Chaturvedi's hands were icy. It was a hell of a way of beginning the most important job in his career.

A figure stepped onto the roadway swinging a lantern. The policeman swore. He was almost on top of him. But the spectre swung around nimbly and made off along the trail. Now and again the shaft of light from the motorbike picked up his form and Chaturvedi glimpsed two skinny legs in oversized sandals. It was as well he kept his distance, for without warning the man stopped.

Not far away the policeman could make out a squat dwelling. He parked nearby and followed the man with the lamp through the open door, stepping over a sleeping dog. His travelling companion was right behind him: a little too close for comfort, he felt. The room was full of smoke and, after the crisp night air, he found it extremely stuffy. As he

entered, the people inside fell silent, except for a whimpering child. Then they all rose and, folding their hands, bent their heads in the traditional Indian greeting:

'*Namastey!*'

It was obvious the family did not know who he was or what he was doing there. However, they fed him well with *dhal*, *chapattis* and roasted corn, and for that he was grateful. With his hunger satisfied and out of the cold, he was reasonably comfortable, despite his damp clothes. He leaned back on the string bed and rested his head against the wall, trying to contain the excitement that pounded through him. His escort told him they would have to wait there for an hour.

More than twenty years earlier the great religious leader, Acharya Vinoba Bhave, had passed this way, trekking barefoot and alone through the notorious Chambal Valley appealing to the *baghis* to give themselves up. He had assured the rebels that, if they did so, the authorities would treat their crimes with leniency. The saint's approach had been based on the philosophy that giving bandits a chance to live normal lives induced a change of heart. Chaturvedi was hardly a saint; just a cop doing his duty. The valleys were alive with spies and deceivers, and his only assurance of a safe passage lay in a password: Vinoba of Chambal. The wrong words at the wrong time and they'd put a bullet in his head straight away.

'*Kambal le liyo, Maharaj.* Sir, take a blanket with you.'

It was the man who had ridden with him. He took the blanket and threw it over his shoulders. The two men stepped into the night.

The fog had lifted and the sky was sprinkled with stars. But the December wind had reached almost gale-like proportions, ripping off branches from the stunted trees and bending the *khazoor* bushes almost to the ground. As they rode along a dirt track towards the Chambal River, Chaturvedi again had trouble controlling the bike. His speed was down to fifteen miles an hour, but the huge potholes in the road combined with the wind to make it an unnerving trip. The headlight beam swung drunkenly from side to side and once he ran off

the track completely. The route was narrowing. Ahead was the silhouette of the hills, dark and jagged. He hoped his guide knew what he was doing — even daylight police patrols found these *behars* treacherous.

'Stop, *Maharaj!*'

By Chaturvedi's calculations they had come about six miles. An outcrop of fantastic and gnarled shapes weathered by time and the elements spiralled away to his left: the infamous and dreaded ravines which, for 1000 years, had been the refuge of rebels, murderers and armed bandits. Here, in places, were sheer drops of 500 feet. It was a devastated and dangerous region. Panther, deer, jackals and foxes found sanctuary in its valleys; cobras slithered through the elephant grass, and there had been times when men had been savaged by bears.

They did not walk directly to the ravines. Instead, the guide produced a torch and led Chaturvedi into the blackened line of trees on the right. It was much warmer, for the wooded depression was out of the wind's direct path. Except for the night noises—a short yelp of an animal, the cry of a bird disturbed in its sleep—they went in silence. Now and again they turned right or left to avoid thorn bushes. Finally, after what seemed like hours in the dark, the two men reached a glade.

'We will stop here,' said the guide. 'We must wait another two hours.'

Chaturvedi marvelled at the precision of the operation. Here, in the clearing, sticks had been laid in readiness for a fire. As his companion set them alight he reflected on the situation. It was obvious they were watching him; otherwise why all the delays? No doubt they thought he might be followed. But if they wanted to keep him waiting another two hours, it was all right with him. He settled himself beside the fire. The wood caught quickly and the jungle became alive with grotesque and dancing shadows.

Chaturvedi studied the man opposite. He had all the appearance of a dacoit himself, with his drooping moustache and long hair. He would have been well paid for this job,

approaching the police and declaring himself the contact man. For a bandit the amount of remuneration always depended on the risks involved. Not for a police officer, though.

The man lowered his watch to the glow of the fire.

'We can go now.'

Chaturvedi glanced at his own: two-thirty. He was taken back the way they had come, but somewhere his guide must have turned off the track; when they stopped, the ragged mounds were everywhere and they'd headed straight back into the bone-chilling wind. The officer shivered and pulled his blanket tighter. He looked up at the towering ridges. God only knew what lay behind — poisonous snakes, ancient skeletons, caches of weapons and countless numbers of warring gangs. Although the temperature was close to freezing, Chaturvedi knew that many dacoits were camped in the territory. Only the small-timers, who did not have murder on their hands, could afford the risk of returning home to their villages in the winter.

'Wait!' The voice came out of nowhere.

'Vinoba of Chambal,' whispered the superintendent.

Someone approached. A torch exploded in his face.

'*Achchha! Maharaj*, come with me.'

The torch was switched off, but Chaturvedi still couldn't see. He blinked rapidly, then he saw that his guide had vanished, leaving another figure wrapped in a scarf and shawl. His new escort walked quickly and Chaturvedi had trouble keeping up. They were following a ridge and the track was barely wide enough for one person. Sometimes his foot squelched in cow manure or he became entangled in the prickly shrubs growing along the edge. Once he completely lost his footing and had to grab a stump or he would have tumbled down the slope. It seemed they had been walking for hours; certainly, they had covered five or six miles. He had no idea where he was, although he assumed they were still in Madhya Pradesh because they had not crossed the Kunwari River or the Chambal River. He had emphasised he would not pass over the state border into Uttar Pradesh — if

the trigger-happy Police Armed Constabulary saw anyone moving around the ravines at night, they wouldn't hesitate to shoot. He'd already risked going into Uttar Pradesh without informing his counterparts and had been fortunate not to have been recognised in his village clothing. He understood why the dacoits felt so edgy about the UP police. With their menacing reputation, he was ill at ease himself.

It was becoming lighter and the jagged peaks were taking on some colour. Chaturvedi had been travelling all night. Within an hour or two the first rays of sunlight would penetrate the ravines, and by midday it would be pleasantly warm. The rhythm of the walk had eased the superintendent's tension. He had grown accustomed to the environment and his nervousness had gone. There was no longer anything sinister about his heavily muffled guide.

The policeman's reflections ended abruptly. On a ledge, fifteen yards up, a man stood with a rifle at hip level. It was pointing straight at him.

'Keep walking,' said his escort. 'Do not falter.'

At the foot of the *garhi* (hillock) the guide stopped Chaturvedi with a raised arm.

'Shall I speak?' the policeman asked.

'Say nothing.'

His escort clapped twice. Immediately, there were two answering claps. At the signal, they began to climb towards the sentry, who ordered Chaturvedi to raise his arms. As he was being frisked, the police officer saw that they had actually arrived on a plateau. Some 200 yards away, two other people waited.

'Go to them,' he was instructed.

He did as he was told, his feet crunching on the loose surface. Again he was searched and asked for the password. Satisfied, the guards turned and pointed. Further on, a group sat around a fire. As the policeman approached, one of them rose and walked slowly towards him.

He was a curious sight. Tall, with long flowing hair and a beard and dressed in white, he looked for all the world like the pictures Chaturvedi had seen of Jesus Christ. He had an air of

authority and the superintendent was impressed. Had the stranger picked the thorns from the *khazoor* bushes and made himself a crown, the image would have been complete.

'I am Man Singh,' he said simply and, kneeling, touched the policeman's boots.

The wind of the night had blown itself out and a dawn calm had settled over the valleys. Light streamed onto the plateau. Farther off, a misty film clung to the twisted peaks. Chaturvedi thought how distant this was from the other world of big towns — Gwalior, Jhansi, Bhopal, with their honking traffic and bicycle bells and the rattling wheels of the ox-carts.

Rising, Man Singh held out a small bundle of rupees as *nazrana.* Chaturvedi did not want to take money, but he could not refuse a gift offered as a token of respect.

Another person, small enough to be a child, had left the group and was coming up behind Man Singh.

The woman was clothed in bell-bottom blue jeans and a long blue shirt. Her shoulder-length black hair was fastened with a red headband. Wide cheek-bones gave her the appearance of someone from Nepal. As sharp, dark eyes stared challengingly into his, Chaturvedi's heart leaped. Thousands of police were combing the ravines for this woman.

Phoolan Devi, the legendary Bandit Queen, dropped to his feet to pay homage.

# CHAPTER TWO

CHATURVEDI looked down on the lowered head, the tiny hands. She was wearing a silver ring set with an unusual stone. Malkhan Singh, the bandit who had surrendered six months earlier, had a ring just like it, Chaturvedi recalled. Malkhan had told him the stone came from the head of a poisonous fish and no harm came to those who wore it. Well, no harm had come to this one, and if any dacoit could have been shot 50 times over it was this woman who called herself *Dasyu Sundari,* Beautiful Robber.

She stood. '*Hum to kuch na dey payengey.* I will not be able to give you anything.'

Chaturvedi raised a hand: it wasn't necessary. They turned and walked back to the fire. She hardly reached the superintendent's shoulders, and he wasn't a tall man. It was difficult to believe that this woman had terrorised the Chambal Valley and Bundelkhand. That she was wanted for countless murders, robberies, kidnappings and beatings. That she had masterminded the atrocity at Behmai. More than twenty months had passed but they still talked of it in Delhi, in Bombay — her exploits were known all over the country.

They led him to a shelter of plastic sheeting. Pots, pans and *mataks* (earthen pitchers) were scattered around the entrance. At the back, frightened eyes stared at him from under blankets. Chaturvedi guessed who they were: two farmers kidnapped a few days earlier.

Phoolan Devi, Man Singh and Chaturvedi sat at the

entrance, but then the woman dacoit changed her mind and invited him to go to the fire. He assumed she did not want the farmers to overhear their conversation. The dacoit leader muttered something to the five men sitting around the fire and they scattered. She directed the police officer to sit. No-one spoke. Phoolan Devi watched a pot of water boil, then poured tea into a bowl and handed it to him with some *chura* (pressed rice). Her demeanour gave him no cause for alarm. The dacoit was like a typical village woman busy with the morning meal.

'I have been to your house,' Chaturvedi said after a long silence.

'When?' she snapped. The savagery in her tone startled him.

'Some time last month. To introduce myself to your family.'

'*Munni mili*?'

Yes, he had met her youngest sister. And her mother and father and brother.

'How do I know you met them? Are you lying to me, you fucking bastard?' Her face was contorted with suspicion and rage. Gone was the village woman of a few moments before. Chaturvedi knew he had to be extremely careful. He was facing a temperamental and deadly killer. One of her men moved forward threateningly as the policeman pulled out a Polaroid photograph of himself with her family. Phoolan Devi snatched it from him. The officer continued calmly:

'I have also a tape recording of their voices.'

He switched on his recorder. When the bandit heard her sister's voice saying hello and that she hoped she was in good health, her features relaxed. Then her mother spoke, saying there hadn't been any trouble lately. Her favourite cow was well, the goats missed her and she wished Phoolan could be there to look after them all. Next, her father's voice came on and Phoolan laughed. The last traces of tension vanished.

She had been described as a sensual beauty. If she had ever possessed physical charms, thought the superintendent, two years on the run had taken a heavy toll. He could feel only pity

for the haunted defiant face, the thin ravaged body in front of him. His quick assessment of her personality bore out police opinion of what she was like. As changeable as the wind, distrusting everyone, short-tempered, easily distracted and supremely egotistical — Behmai had left her power-drunk. Put a gun in her hand and she was lethal. It would be nothing to this woman, brutalised by men and with every reason to scorn the authorities, to shoot him down and send his body back to Bhind on the back of an ox-cart.

'What do you want of me?' she asked.

Chaturvedi hesitated. What could he say? That he wanted her to give herself up? That the valleys were thick with police and other bandits who wanted her dead? Tread warily, he told himself. Don't try to force her hand.

'Perhaps I should ask what you want of me,' he said.

'Just to see what you look like.'

He knew she was playing with him. 'I am not a film star,' he said.

His name was known in the ravines as the policeman who negotiated the surrender of Malkhan Singh. In that, he had been honourable from start to finish. He had kept all his promises and Malkhan was alive and in jail awaiting parole.

'I will be honest with you. I think you know why I have come. I want you to give yourself up.'

A stream of her spittle shot into the fire, a red mass of chewed betel nut.

'You ass licker! Do you think you can just come and ask me to surrender? I am Phoolan Devi! I could kill you this very moment or send you limping away with a bullet in your foot! Don't think I will come running when you snap your fingers!'

The superintendent felt he was losing control. Her gang had come in closer, rifles in hand. He asked for more tea.

Man Singh, sensing that Phoolan Devi was becoming dangerous, tried to ease the tension by inviting the police officer to meet the other members of the gang. Relieved, Chaturvedi walked away with the Bandit Queen's paramour. The men gave their names defiantly: Mohan Singh, Govind, Mehndi Hasan, Jeevan, Munna. They were now completely

relaxed, showing no indication that only moments earlier they could have murdered him.

How were their families? They wanted to know. Chaturvedi told them what he could, although he had not kept himself so well informed about the relatives of these less significant dacoits. Phoolan Devi was the prize, so it was only her family he had attempted to meet. During the exchange, she had sidled up to him and had been listening intently.

'I am preparing more food for you.' Now the infamous dacoit was a humble servant girl.

They returned to the fire, where she began to roll thin *rotis* on a stone.

'If I gave up, would I be hanged?'

'No. We don't hang dacoits who surrender. If you run and we catch you, that might be different.'

'Ha. If I run and you catch me, you would shoot me down, like those motherfuckers in UP shot Chhabiram after he gave up.'

'I cannot make excuses for the Uttar Pradesh police. They claim Chhabiram was about to trick them. They had to shoot him. But, you know, there are many doubts about the affair.'

'What about Behmai? In UP they want to hang me for that.'

'You are not in UP now. And I don't think they will get you as far as the rope. There are thousands of police hunting through the ravines on the other side of the Chambal. They are all looking for you, Phoolan Devi. When they see you, they will shoot you. That's if Sriram and Lalaram Singh don't get you first.'

She spat. 'They can riddle me with their bullets, but before I fall, I will crawl to those motherfuckers in my blood and personally slice off their pricks after what they did to me!'

The brutal rape of Phoolan Devi was as well known as her revenge at Behmai. He could almost feel the loathing in her heart for the two dacoit brothers. He had heard that the UP police had employed these two, who were themselves responsible for murdering policemen and chopping up villagers with axes, to comb the ravines for her.

'There are many conditions you would have to meet before I surrendered,' she said.

'I can make no promises. Except to say your family will not be harmed.' Chaturvedi was given *bajra, rotis, alu subzi* and *dhal*.

They ate in silence for a while. Then she looked up abruptly. 'I would want to see my family. You will have to bring them to me. My village is filled with informers and the fields are full of police.'

Man Singh reached over and stroked her face. 'I heard you two got married,' said Chaturvedi, taking advantage of this moment of tenderness. 'Where did it happen? Did you have a priest?'

'There was no *pujari-ujari*. We *baghis* do not need priests,' she said scornfully. 'We made our vows in the jungle.'

The superintendent thought it might amuse her to take her picture with the Polaroid. He pulled out a camera, but as soon as she saw it she shouted, 'No! I have been told my picture is worth 30,000 rupees. You cannot take it!'

It was true. Police forces and the press had been screaming for a photograph of her. Public Enemy Number One for two years and no-one knew what she looked like.

Suddenly she said, 'All right.' He took a snap of her by the fire and peeled off the print.

'Ha! *Aap to jaadu kariyo.* You can do magic!'

Gleeful, she jumped to her feet and insisted that all the men come and look at the picture.

Such a child. And yet just across the clearing, propped against the post, was her .315 Mauser rifle, and that was no toy. They drank more tea and then she told him he must go.

'If you want to contact me again,' he said, 'you know where I am.'

She glared at him. The most innocent remarks could upset her.

'Do not betray us,' she warned.

'I have eaten your salt,' said Rajendra Chaturvedi. 'You can be sure I will not break my word.'

The sun had dropped behind the ravines by the time he

arrived back at his motorcycle. A villager was waiting to direct him back to the Bhind road. The wind swirled across the plains and the evening chill was setting in. But he was on his way home.

West of Etawah and just inside the Uttar Pradesh border, a skiff battled the current on the Yamuna River. This was always a difficult stretch and the last thing the oarsman wanted was an impatient passenger.

'Can't you go any faster, man?' he kept urging. The boatman gave a non-committal shake of his head.

On the far bank, the passenger pushed two rupees into the Mallah's hand and scrambled up the steps. Then he ran to the police station and asked for a name.

'The superintendent has made contact,' said the breathless informer. 'She is operating from Tehengur village district. We can't say exactly where. It was difficult, you understand.'

The officer understood. He paid off the man and booked a call to Lucknow. This was their last chance to eliminate the elusive woman bandit.

No negotiations, no arrests: just a firing squad and let the arguments come afterwards.

# PART II

# CHAPTER THREE

A FEW MILES from the old British station at Mhow, in the Vindhya mountain range in south-west Madhya Pradesh, lies the ruined city of Mandu. Once it was a pleasure resort for Muslim and Hindu princes who bathed in its lakes, built imposing cathedrals and erected a palace in which to store their gold coins. They put up domes and overhanging balconies, and called it 'The Citadel of Joy'.

The last sultan to occupy the royal apartments, Bas Bahadur, made a village girl his queen, after hearing her sing on the jungle-clad banks of the meandering Narmada River. He constructed splendid monuments to celebrate his love for her, including a delicate pavilion from where she could look out over the waters she adored. Their passion was to end in tragedy. When the Moghuls attacked Mandu, the sultan, more gallant in love than war, fled, leaving behind his beloved Rupmati. Rather than surrender to the invaders, the sultana plunged a knife into her heart. Now only ghostly mosques and temples, crumbled arches and massive decayed palaces remain, but sometimes, it is said, her voice can still be heard across the Narmada.

In these same forested highlands, a legendary battle took place between the giants Sumbha and Nisumbha and the Goddess Durga. The two demons longed for immortality and devoted themselves to thousands of years of good works. Finally, the Lord Siva, unable to withhold his blessings any longer, granted them riches and strength excelling those of the gods. Having gained this exalted position, they turned

against the deities and from their stronghold in the Vindhya mountains began to terrorise the countryside, stealing and devouring children. The people prayed for deliverance and Lord Siva sent his beautiful consort Parvati, in her divine and terrible guise as Durga, the Goddess of Destruction, to slay the ogres.

Out of this region of forgotten splendour, of myth and reality, rises the Chambal River. It is 600 miles long and cuts through part of the strange and tortured country described as the Indian badlands. From its source, the river sweeps north, winding around the old fortress at Nagutwara, through the rugged gorges of the Mokundara mountains, until it flows into a huge lake, Gandhi Sagar, where its waters are harnessed for irrigation and electric power. At the northern end of the dam the river gushes over clusters of slippery black boulders and 50 miles on has become so deep that elephants carrying the Moghul conquerors had to swim across.

Flowing now to the north-east, the river forms the border between Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan and runs through that region of central India known as the Chambal Valley. Already, the topography has changed. Small mounds sprawling from the river's edge have become a maze of hillocks which quickly grow in height and width until they resemble a vast moonscape of rugged gorges.

British troops under General Lake crossed the river at the old city of Dhaulpur in 1805, but found the approaches through the ravines so difficult that a special road had to be cut for the 30,000 men, their horses and elephants. 30 miles south of the Taj Mahal at Agra, the river turns to the south-east and passes through the ravines parallel to the River Yamuna. Just east of the fortress city of Gwalior, the Chambal flows from Madhya Pradesh into Uttar Pradesh and joins the Yamuna which in turn meets the Ganges 200 miles downstream at Allahabad. While the Ganges is recognised as a holy, peaceful river, the Chambal represents rebellion and violence, reaching back to the twelfth century when the Tomar rulers, forced out of Delhi by the Chauhans, made their way south to the labyrinth of gorges.

Quick to recognise the possibilities this deadly maze offered, they struck out from there, adopting hit-and-run guerilla tactics and defying all authority. It was considered a legitimate airing of their grievances and an assertion of independence to loot and terrorise subjects of Delhi and nearby Gwalior. Into the ranks of these *baghis* (rebels) spilled Hindu princes who, in the fifteenth century, were also driven out of Delhi and vowed eternal vengeance on the Muslim conquerors.

The Gwalior region was a natural breeding-ground for the rebels. It was through the tangle of ravines that marching armies and trade caravans passed: ripe pickings for those who, in the name of political rebellion, engaged in highway robbery. Although the government used every means to put them down, the *baghis* thrived and multiplied, since they made sure a portion of their bounty was distributed among poor villagers, who in turn provided them with food and shelter. To the authorities, the marauders were nothing more than dacoits (robbers). But their village supporters lauded them as heroes, bestowing upon them the honorific titles of Master and Raja. Some were even eulogised in folk songs.

From this state of anarchy emerged ruling chiefs, who administered their domain along feudal lines. Landowners waged war on neighbouring landowners, claiming sovereignty on the premise that might is right. And others amassed fortunes by refusing to pay land taxes. To increase their feudal holdings, mediaeval rulers engaged the services of the growing number of *baghi* gangs, a fact noted in British police reports of the last century. In 1843 Sir William Sleeman observed that there was hardly a Hindu military clan in the Gwalior or neighbouring Bundelkhand territory which did not keep a team of robbers as a source of revenue. Gang activities were condoned and members sheltered so long as they operated outside their patron's territory.

Often, seemingly law-abiding citizens were unmasked as wrongdoers, giving strength to a legend that the Chambal River's waters contain certain elements that, when mixed with the soil of the valley, transform ordinary folk into demons.

Perhaps magic is afoot, for the area has never been free from robbery and violence. Bandits appear to rise up out of the soil. No sooner has one evil been put down than another replaces it. Since that time towards the end of the twelfth century when Prith Viraj Chauhan sent the Tomar Rajput, Raja Anangpal, running to the ravines, every conceivable type of gang has made the Chambal and Bundelkhand districts its home: cut-throats, highway robbers, the infamous Thugs who murdered by divine decree, kidnappers and stand-over men.

The Tomars, using guerilla warfare methods, were able to maintain control of a major part of the Chambal Basin for 200 years. But with the death of Man Singh in 1523 they lost their last effective leader and began a steady decline. In part, this was due to their almost constant rebellion against the Moghul overlords. One after another, the Rajput princes, through dissatisfaction with the policy of the Emperor in Delhi, went on a rampage, rising against such forces as Akbar and Shah Jahan. But the main reason for their downward course was their own pettiness and greed which involved them in an endless spate of blood feuds, exhausting their energies and weakening their ranks.

For generations the region had served as a buffer zone between the Muslim powers of Delhi, Agra and Uttar Pradesh and the Hindu kingdoms of Rajasthan. Its numerous small principalities were formed on the basis of clan and kinship. These were often united in a common cause — the Rajputs of the lower Chambal always gave the Thakurs of Bundelkhand a helping hand — but they could also turn against one another in war, with the result that anarchy prevailed throughout the area.

Under such conditions, *baghi* gangs reigned supreme and were joined by other freedom-loving martial clans such as the Marathas, the Bundelas and the Afghans who, fired by the amount of killing and looting taking place, added their talents to the chaos.

At last, Aurangzeb, a later successor of Akbar, routed the Rajput kingdoms of Central India. As if he had given a signal,

all hell broke loose, with the Rajput families vowing eternal enmity against the Moghul Empire and coming out in open rebellion. To make matters worse for the Moghuls, the Rajput *baghis* saw themselves, and were generally regarded, as freedom fighters 'liberating the people'. The Moghul empire found it impossible to contain the revolts and the whole of Central India plunged into a state of lawlessness, leaving the door open for the Marathas to become a dominant force.

During the upheaval, Mahadji Scindhia, son of a man who had risen from humble rural origins to the status of an important district chief, seized Gwalior and turned it into an independent state, continuing a dynasty that was to run until Indian independence in 1947. His successor, and grand-nephew Daulaut Rao Scindhia, had established the family's absolute supremacy with an army of 26,000 regular infantry, 13,000 cavalry, 396 cannon and the allegiance of a large band of outlaws known as Pindaris. From Daulaut's accession in 1794 hordes of gangs devastated the Chambal and Bundelkhand regions, finding refuge in their ravines and forests. It was not that banditry was unknown in other parts of India: what was unique about these troubled districts was that robbery and murder had evolved into hereditary professions.

With the Moghul administration effectively destroyed, a terrifying phenomenon had erupted from the *baghis* of the central region — Pindaris. Under leaders noted for their ruthlessness and courage, these mounted robbers travelled great distances to carry out their savage acts. Although they used firearms, their favourite weapons were bamboo spears. The Pindaris, operating in gangs of up to 500, used surprise tactics, swooping on villages, ransacking and committing brutalities guaranteed to leave behind memories never to be erased. They impaled children on their spears, forcing parents to watch. They raped women in front of their husbands and when gang members were finished with them, cold-bloodedly killed them. Villagers, hearing that Pindaris were in the district and knowing themselves incapable of resisting, preferred to set themselves alight, along with their

wives and children, and burn to death. Young women who escaped this terrible end were ravished, then tied three and four to a horse and led off to be sold. Even tribal chieftains trembled within their forts, powerless to protect their subjects.

Amir Khan, the leader of one horde, was patronised by the ruler of Indore who turned a blind eye when Khan overran the town of Sagar. The ruler of Sagar was too terrified to leave his fort and for a month the Pindaris tortured, raped and pillaged, leaving only when an army detachment from the Raja of Nagpur appeared on the scene.

It was because the British feared that their prestige in India was being undermined that the Pindaris' reign of terror finally came to an end. Since the breakdown of the Moghul administration the British had been battling the Marathas who were intent on taking control of the country. The Marathas had been using the Pindaris, whose incursions had been getting more ferocious, to strike at British authority.

Lord Hastings, Governor-General of India, realised that despite the British policy of non-intervention, something had to be done about the gangs. He launched a massive military campaign against them, helped by his having managed to persuade some of the Indian princes to withdraw their support of the robbers. In 1818, the Pindaris were eliminated by a force of 20,000 men and 300 guns — the largest the British had commanded in India to that date. It was the struggle with the Pindaris that precipitated all-out war with the Marathas a few years later.

The Pindaris' downfall brought no peace to the Chambal. The region was haunted by an even more sinister menace: Thugs. This well-organised fraternity of professional assassins had been around for centuries and its members were to be found all over India, but its roots are firmly planted in the Chambal and Bundelkhand areas. Broadly translated, the name means 'a practitioner of crafty arts'. They were also called Phansigars, meaning 'noose operators'.

Thugs claimed ancient Persian descent from a pastoral tribe, the Sagartii, who supported Xerxes' army. They

entered India with one of the Muslim invaders, eventually settling in the region surrounding Agra and moving out from there. By the seventeenth century all roads south of Delhi were infested with them.

These hereditary murderers had become a mixture of Muslims and Hindus, although the original families, seven in all, were purely worshippers of Islam. Their lives were strictly regulated by the clan to which they belonged. They were linked only by their 'time-honoured craft', their deity, the extraordinary sign-language they used and through which members recognised each other, and Ramasi, the special jargon they spoke. The most exclusive group was the Mooltanee Thugs, who practised infanticide to such an extent that they kept alive only enough female children to provide themselves with wives. The lowest clan were the Sooseeas, with whom the other six groups associated as little as possible.

Travelling in gangs attired as wealthy merchants, they gained the confidence of wayfarers and then, when the opportunity arose, strangled them with a *roomal* (yellow or white scarf) or a noose. Taking the booty, they buried the body at the roadside. Usually, scouts were sent ahead to mark a suitable spot where the horrible deed could be effected and to prepare the grave.

Thugs were staunch devotees of the Goddess Kali (Durga) and their murderous activities were in accordance with ancient and rigidly prescribed rites involving the consecration of the pick-axe — another of their weapons — and *goor*, coarse sugar. According to lore, the pick-axe was one of the deity's teeth which she plucked out and gave to the first members of the brotherhood, and the *roomal* came from the hem of her garment. The history of that piece of material appears to be a variation of the tale of Durga's slaying of the giants in the Vindhya mountains. Once, a terrifying demon laid siege to the world, devouring children as soon as they were born. Kali was sent to destroy him and sliced him in two with her sword, but for each drop of his blood there sprang up a new demon until they were so numerous that the goddess

was in danger of losing the battle. So she created two men from the sweat of one of her arms and, presenting them with a piece of material torn from the hem of her garment, ordered them to strangle the awful brood. Having accomplished this, the two returned the scarf, but Kali bade them keep it for posterity to use against all those whom she would in the future designate.

Sentiment played no part in the strangulations, since Thugs believed their victims were ordained for death by Durga, also known as the Black Goddess. The end was so quick that the victims had but moments to comprehend what was happening. One Thug, Feringhia, who was the real cause of the fraternity's downfall since he traded its secrets for his life, did confess to sometimes feeling remorse. He maintained, however, that eating the consecrated sugar at the feast after each murder set the Thugs' minds at rest and then turned them back to normal husbands and fathers. Perhaps the fatal *goor* did account for the 'trade's' hold over its members. For there were incredible instances of Thugs enlisting with the British as soldiers and, obtaining leave, rejoining their clan and committing as many murders as possible before returning to their regiment completely satiated.

Credit for the destruction of the organisation is shared by Lord William Bentinck and Captain William Sleeman, who was later to be knighted. Lord Bentinck was determined to do something about curbing the Thug menace and took the initiative by passing certain acts giving wide discretionary powers to the men he selected to do the job. He was fortunate in choosing Captain Sleeman to spearhead the offensive. 'Thuggee Sleeman', as he was to become known, was a capable, thorough, patient man who, because of his firm yet open-minded approach, was able to build up a rapport with a number of captured Thugs, including Feringhia and his gang. The prisoners passed on to him valuable information about their philosophy and activities. With the help of six other British officers, the co-operation of various ruling princes and his 'stool-pigeons', Sleeman and his assistants

were able to record in 1840 that the evil had been contained. The Thugs themselves claimed that the fraternity was destroyed because some members failed to keep strictly to the Goddess Kali's commands.

Unfortunately Sleeman was inclined to see the Thugs' demise, after an operation spanning two decades, as an end to the bandit problem, and believed the 'mere gangs of robbers' who continued to plague the Chambal were small fry who would soon be put down. In 1849 he wrote to a friend: 'Who the Gwalior men are that are plundering I know not; but they are men of no note and if pressed skilfully and rigorously in time will soon be put down.' Not so. In 1857, one year after 'Thuggee Sleeman' died at sea off Ceylon, the gangs of the Chambal joined against the British in India's First War of Independence. Far from being 'put down' the gangs flourished over the next century, and in 1981 carried out one of the bloodiest bandit massacres in Indian history.

The Indian Mutiny, as the British called the War of Independence, was confined to Central and parts of Northern India. It broke out after an incident in the Bengal Army in which a Sepoy was insulted by a low-caste employee of the arsenal. A Sepoy was a Western-trained Indian soldier, whose high caste often interfered with his military duties.

The new Enfield rifle had just been introduced, and to load it, the cartridges had first to be lubricated, then have their ends bitten off by the Sepoys. According to rumour — and there seems to have been some truth here — the grease used was a mixture of pig and cow lard, an insult to both Muslims and Hindus. The low-caste individual had taunted his social superior, sneering that he had defiled himself in touching the bullets. The news spread rapidly, causing great alarm. The British tried to rectify the matter by switching to clarified butter and instructing that men should grease their own cartridges. But it was too late.

The altercation was only a pretext for the revolt, which had been brewing for some time. India had been undergoing a process of westernisation, although the British East India Company had emphasised a policy of non-interference. Its

programmes had appeared to affect only the surface of Hindu society, but British administration was striking at the very heart of Indian orthodoxy and everywhere traditions were breaking down. Even the old aristocracy was being taken over by British officials.

Lord Dalhousie, Governor-General in the early 1850s, was responsible for introducing sweeping social reforms, several of which were seen as a direct attempt to destroy the caste system. Among those leading to the greatest discontent was a Bill permitting the remarriage of Hindu women, and another allowing Christian converts to share with their Hindu kin in family property. Lord Dalhousie also instituted an inquiry into the titles of landholders and since many estates had been acquired illegally — usually with the help of gangs — the land was confiscated where there was any doubt of authenticity. In the five years preceding the rebellion, 20,000 estates were lost in this way. All India seethed with resentment at the changes taking place and looked for a sign.

It came in a curious way. At about the same time as the problem with the Sepoys, a village watchman arrived at a hamlet with some *chapattis*. He handed over one of the flatbreads, saying 'To the north, the south, the east and the west', with the order that four more be made and passed on to the next village with the same instructions — an Indian version of the chain letter. Where he and his *chapattis* had come from no-one knew, but what was known was that in the past, in times of trouble, there had been similar appearances. It was all that was needed to point the disgruntled population in a particular direction, and Central India exploded.

British troops became concerned with putting down a rebellion which, if allowed to spread, would lose the East India Company its most lucrative source of revenue. Innumerable small principalities made up the areas where the revolt was most intense and the spirit of nationalism strongest. Conditions were ideal for the gangs to flourish. Although the British had earlier been preoccupied with eliminating the Thugs, they had not applied absolute pressure to the dacoit gangs springing up throughout the

Chambal and Bundelkhand. There were at least 72 gang-leaders south of the Yamuna River in control of more than 1600 men, and in the northern reaches of the river some 1200 men were under the command of another 46 leaders. The gangs had actually multiplied during the authorities' anti-crime drives.

For the *baghis*, booty was to be had either through private raids or by supporting the various independent states involved in fighting the British. Some prominent gangs joined the ranks of the Rani of Jhansi and Tantia Tope, the real leaders in the struggle for independence. The Rani had been a victim of the new British policy of confiscating principalities whose rulers died without leaving an heir. Widowed while still in her early twenties and with no son to succeed her husband, she decided to take over as head of state. The British seized her domains and pensioned her off, but in 1857 the Rani rose against them. She quickly became a national heroine, described by British troops as 'the best man on the other side'.

As a result of the mutiny, the administration of India passed out of the hands of the East India Company and into those of the British Government, who immediately set to restoring law and order in a way that would discourage any future ideas of rebellion. They began to register the high number of robberies in the Agra Division of the North-West Province, which seemed to be aimed at British settlements. Having just had the experience of an insurrection, they were certainly not going to stand for such tactics and moved swiftly to deal with the situation.

The culprits were the Kanjar caste, whose gangs were relatively small-time operators when compared with Pindaris and Thugs but who, nonetheless, caused a great deal of suffering throughout the Chambal and beyond. They had gained prominence during the years of dissatisfaction, turning robbery into a way of life. Armed with batons, swords and spears, they swept on villages, striking shortly after dusk, looting, then fleeing back to their hideouts before dawn. The Kanjars' forays were occasional, rather than constant, and the

gangs tended to be unstable, as were their leaders.

Since their targets were mostly within British territory, the authorities' patience finally wore thin and a Frontier Special Force was set up, consisting mainly of snipers. First, the FSF organised a network of informers and then began shooting down the Kanjars as they moved in on selected villages. But it was not so much the FSF who obliterated this group of bandits. Their fade-out was due to gangs from other castes who had risen from the ashes of the Thugs and from the rebels who operated in Central India. These *baghis* had adapted to change and had taken the art of dacoity — the official term for armed robbery with violence committed by five or more people — to more sophisticated levels.

During the nineteenth century, the lower Chambal basin and Bundelkhand were struggling against almost continual famines. This, along with the region's unrest, gave rise to perfect conditions for banditry. At that time, dacoit gangs were assessed according to their strength of numbers rather than any particular *modus operandi.* They used whatever sharp-edged weapons they could get their hands on, but towards the end of the century guns found their way into the *baghi* ranks. From then on, their weapons have been as up-to-date as those of the authorities.

Dacoit bands terrorised the villagers, looting, burning, murdering and raping with little opposition from the police. An official report in 1886 noted that the police existed in name only and dacoity and violent crimes were rife throughout all districts of what was then the state of Gwalior. There was, said the report, no real protection of life and property and the principle followed by the district officials appeared to lead to the concealment, rather than to the prevention or detection of crime. The British Government, which had been making determined attempts to crush the crime wave, pressured the Gwalior rulers to tackle the problem. At last, in 1920, the then ruler, Madhav Rao Scindhia, called together more than 1200 landowners and village chiefs and, exerting the authority of a feudal lord, invoked shame on them for allowing dacoits to remain in their

territory. There would be dire consequences, he threatened, if the brigands in his state were not put down. Within 30 days, 83 dacoits were brought to the royal palace and fourteen others surrendered. Looted property was returned to the owners and two of the villages where the bandits had been brought up were burned. The conference had made an impact ... for a time.

Within a year, the problem of dacoity was back and terror had returned to the valley. One stumbling-block involved the distribution of land. The state handed out one village to several landlords, a practice which caused terrible dissension. Disputes often turned to violence, with landowners employing dacoits to fight on their behalf, as had happened down through the centuries. To compound the problem, during Scindhia's rule there was no licensing of arms and no permission was needed to possess vast quantities of sophisticated weapons. Even when licensing of weapons was brought in after independence in 1947 only a small number of guns were declared, many passing into the hands of the gangs who were willing to pay far more than the market price.

Today's dacoits operate as of old, but have adopted a number of new tactics. Now they exact protection money from villagers, levy subscriptions, administer justice in village feuds, tax government builders, pressure voters in local elections and kidnap for ransom. As well, they have a preference for smaller membership, as this gives them greater mobility against an increasingly efficient police force. Their hold on the villages of the ravines depends very much on the charisma of the leader and on the number of weapons they possess. On occasions, dacoits have engaged in pitched battles with the police and sometimes a strong gang coming across a small group of police scouts will attack with the intention of eliminating them. Marauding bandits are a ruthless, bloodthirsty lot, who stop at nothing to achieve notoriety and instil fear throughout the countryside. Paradoxically, once their infamy has been established, many wish to be recognised as munificent benefactors and protectors of the poor against the rich, forgetting that most of

their earlier, brutal atrocities were perpetrated on rich and poor alike. Modern gangs travel with tarpaulins, light floor coverings, bed rolls and light aluminium cooking utensils. Usually, individuals carry a bag packed with enough uncooked cereal for a few days, water, a change of clothes, a torch and other bits and pieces.

Some villagers become bandits while still children, or because they have been involved in some form of family or village squabble. Others are victims of their own egotism — they hope to achieve leadership status, quick wealth, thrills and a life of relative leisure. Female dacoits are rare. A woman's entry into gang life usually begins as the mistress of the leader who might generously pass her around to his men.

They, like male newcomers, are carefully vetted, women of the same caste being preferred. Gangs have always been run more successfully when organised along caste lines, as one of the main causes of friction is rivalry between the social groups. There are four castes, each of which is divided into smaller groups, or sub-castes. At the top is the priestly caste of Brahmins. Then there are the Kshatriyas, who are traditionally rulers and soldiers. Third in line of importance are the Vaisyas, the merchants of old, and at the bottom are the Sudras, made up of labourers and artisans. These groups are separated by ancient and rigid sets of rules governing descent, occupation, marriage, ritual, purity and pollution. Some groups belonging to the same caste neither meet nor associate with one another, so strict are their traditions.

The Aryan invaders, who arrived in about 2000 BC searching for new pastures, laid the foundations of the caste system. At that time the warrior rulers, the Kshatriyas, were 'top dog', with the Brahmins and Vaisyas following. It was still possible then to change social positions through brains, brawn or a ruler's favour.

A bold, erotic, flesh-eating people, the Aryans participated in rituals that included the blood sacrifice of many creatures. In those days there was no concern with reincarnation; they worshipped the spirits of their ancestors and the gods of the elements. The men downed vast amounts of Soma, a potent

liquor whose recipe has evaporated in the mists of time, and the women were liberated in a way that would make their modern sisters blush.

The original inhabitants, the Dasyus, were serious and devout and lived in a closed society that was to have a profound influence on their amoral conquerors. In time, the two cultures merged and today's caste system was born. Somewhere during the centuries of bloodshed, ritual triumphed over the sword and the Brahmins gained superiority. Their teachings withstood the turmoil and confusion and filtered through from isolated centres of learning to the masses. In spite of endless movements of people, policies, religions, creeds, languages and customs, the Brahmin priesthood remained constant, linking the past with the present, uniting all differences and forming a recognisable pattern — the caste system as it is today. From India's original inhabitants, the Dasyus, emerged the fourth group, the Sudras, who were left few rights. Throughout the Chambal Valley they were not permitted to own land, graze cattle, enter temples or even draw water from village wells.

In 1949, the Indian Government declared itself opposed to the social barriers of caste, and areas that were formerly restricted to the higher groups were thrown open to the Sudras. However, an official decree does not overnight alter hundreds of years of tradition, particularly in rural parts, and there is fierce opposition whenever a Sudra tries to better himself socially and politically. In the Chambal Valley, Brahmin and Kshatriya groups show each other mutual respect, but the Sudras remain resigned to their lowly status.

Often, the only way out for them leads to the ravines.

# PART III

# PART III

# CHAPTER FOUR

DEVIDIN KEWAT, like his father and grandfather before him, was a poor man: a Sudra, of the Mallah (boatman) subcaste. His father had been a ferryman, carrying travellers across the Yamuna before the steel bridge was constructed to link the road from Orai to Kanpur. Devidin worked as a small-time farmer and part-time mason, occupations that were never likely to earn him a fortune. Nor could he ever hope to add to the two *bighas* (about two and a half acres) of land he possessed — land which was anyway a constant source of worry, for his own brother had cast greedy eyes over it. No, Devidin was hard-headed enough to know that dreaming of extra acres did not fill the belly. Better that his wife Moola continue to twine ropes to bring in the few extra *paise* the family of seven so desperately needed. On Sundays and Wednesdays, Moola sewed and cut hemp, for these were auspicious days, and sometimes she went to the field to cut melons.

The mud-brick house where they all lived overlooked the confluence of the None and Yamuna Rivers, which formed the northern and eastern boundaries of Gorhapurwa village. Its front room opened onto a courtyard a foot higher than the level of the room. The courtyard led to another room, also higher, which opened onto yet another courtyard, higher still. This last yard was actually a rear exit leading to the house behind. Many of the ravine dwellings were built this way so that dacoits, resting up with relatives or friends, would have a chance to escape if police launched a snap raid. From

the back of his house, Devidin Kewat had a clear view of the entire riverfront. He could also see the edge of the ravines. He had always resistd the lure of the gorges, though he, like the other villagers, was aware of the riches they offered. He knew, too, that a dacoit's life was violent and short with few domestic pleasures. Anyway, he believed he was an honest man.

Devidin had been bitterly disappointed when, in 1960, Moola had borne him a daughter, Rukmani. He had wanted a male child. After all, a boy was blessed by the gods and so would he have been as the child's father. They would have endowed his son with strength and courage, and eventually more *bighas* of land would have come to the family through him. Nevertheless he, Devidin Kewat, could still hold his head high in the village, for Moola had not proved barren and there was plenty of time.

At that time, he and Moola were living with his family, who had also been looking forward to a boy. Accommodation was scarce and expensive, so they crammed in together — his parents, his brothers and sisters and his brothers' wives. It was not an unusual situation and Devidin was in no hurry to find a place of his own. Families had always lived this way; the father was the head of the household, the *karta*, the trustee, who relinquished the position to his eldest son when he grew too old.

Moola was found to be again with child. There was great rejoicing — now Devidin's prayers would be answered. For the first time he felt something like tenderness for Rukmani. His daughter would watch over the boy as they grew and look to his needs along with her mother and grandmother; it would be nothing less than her duty to ensure her brother's well-being.

Devidin was walking back from the fields when he heard the village gossip. His wife had given birth to a daughter. His heart sank. It was a cruel blow. Truly, all Heaven was against him. He had been sent a second mouth to feed that would be every bit as much trouble as the first. He needed sons, not daughters. Daughters were weak and timid and he would

have to find husbands for them, men who would be prepared to provide them with dowries. He looked at Phoolan Devi, for that is what they would call the new child, and his heart turned against her.

In those early years of crowded family living, the children grew up attached to their mother and grandmother. Having survived infancy, they could expect at least twenty years of life, although Phoolan Devi was a sickly child, often given to fevers. It was clear she was not going to grow into any great beauty. Her nose was flat and she remained chubby. To make matters worse, she had a nasty temper and a headstrong, wilful nature. Devidin realised they might have trouble getting rid of her as a wife.

Poor Devidin. Moola bore him yet another daughter, Ramkali, and this made him treat his second even more harshly, never losing an opportunity to shout at her or beat her. This was not unusual — around the Chambal not only are girls less favoured, but they frequently become the family scapegoat on whom relatives vent their wrath. In Devidin's family, Phoolan filled this role.

The girls ran with the village children and played with hoops and at *gilli danda*, a game in which a shortened stub of wood, sharpened at each end, is struck with a stick and made to fly up. A favourite spot was the riverbank where they would toss bits of wood, thatch and stones, or fish in the muddied waters snaking past. By the time she was five, Phoolan was already working for the family — far harder than her favoured sisters. She helped with the chores of the household but more often would be dispatched to the edges of the ravines to graze the goats and the cow. Those were the times she loved best, when she was free to laugh with the sun and wind and to chatter incessantly with the animals for which she developed a lifelong passion. There, in the grassy pockets, no-one nagged at her or teased her or whipped her. There, Phoolan Devi could have been what her name implied: the Goddess of Flowers.

Like most of the children of the district, she did not learn to read or write. Her services were indispensable to her family.

The education authorities had tried for some years, and are still trying, to set up schools in the villages of the ravine areas, without much success. Not only are the children quickly bored, but parents argue that literature and arithmetic have no bearing on work to be done in a rural environment. Where girls are concerned, the uppermost consideration is to get them married and off the family's back. It was not surprising, then, that before she reached puberty, a spouse had been arranged for Devidin's eldest daughter, Rukmani. His name was Rampal, from the village of Budhadana, near Auraiya, the regional headquarters of the Jalaun district. Attempts had been made to restrain child marriages and the Hindu Marriage Act set a minimum age of eighteen for bridegrooms and fifteen for brides. But in rural districts it is the law of the villages that prevails, not the law of Delhi.

When Rukmani left, Phoolan Devi was forced to carry the burden of more work. As well as continuing to shepherd the livestock, the child had to fetch and draw water from the village well, gather firewood and care for her younger sister and baby brother for, finally, a son had been born. Phoolan Devi's high spirits and fondness for jokes often landed her in trouble with the elders and Devidin began looking for someone to take her off his hands.

Puttilal, a Mallah from the nearby village of Maheshpur, had already told Devidin he was looking for another woman after the death of his first wife and Devidin had told him that he would be happy to give him Phoolan, provided an arrangement could be made about the dowry. Unlike villages on the other side of the Chambal River in Madhya Pradesh, where dowries are given by the bride's relatives, families in Uttar Pradesh villages adopt a different custom. The bride stays with her father for a period after marriage until the bridegroom pays a dowry in order to claim her.

Devidin made a proposal to Puttilal: because Phoolan was still needed around the house, she would be allowed to join Puttilal after three years. Puttilal was unhappy about that suggestion. He, too, needed a woman about the house, but when Devidin insisted and pointed out that Phoolan Devi

was sick and would need time to recover, he relented. Anyway, he was told, she would be worth waiting for because she was chaste. The sexual purity of brides-to-be is a vital consideration of the higher castes, although more tolerance is shown by those of a lower social order. Prospective husbands are aware that promiscuity is not uncommon in the valley and it is a satisfying catch to find a girl or woman who is still a virgin. Many disputes, in which the women are invariably blamed, flare up following the discovery of clandestine sexual relationships. One of the causes is the intense boredom experienced by women who are, for the most part, tied to menial household chores — particularly women of the Brahmin and Kshatriya castes. Unlike their low-caste 'sisters', who have the freedom to wander the fields and who can even work alongside their men, women of higher status are hearth-bound and so look outside for some diversion.

Phoolan Devi had no say in the marriage being arranged by her father. It was a matter for the family, not for her. There were three basic considerations in the wedding arrangements: Devidin wanted the three-year *gohona*, Puttilal wanted a virgin and both men had to be satisfied that the castes were equal. Marriage outside a caste inevitably raises the displeasure of other caste members who often go to the length of burning the houses of those involved. And anyone who marries into a different caste finds future acceptance by the husband's relatives difficult, if not impossible. Among higher castes, the economic status of the families and the horoscope of each of the marriage partners are other matters to consider, but among the poor Sudras there is little ceremony.

Feverish and a little bewildered, Phoolan Devi was married to Puttilal, twenty years her senior, before a local priest, and then sent off to fetch water from the well. Within three months Puttilal was asking for her. He was fed up with working and cooking for himself. He wanted his child-wife to come to Maheshpur and tend his needs. A bicycle and a bed were exchanged, along with some farm produce, and Phoolan Devi was led away on foot to begin married life at the age of eleven.

There was no lightness in Puttilal's house, no laughter, no humour and certainly no-one her own age. It was inevitable that her wilful nature would surface but for the time being her lot was no different from that of any other village girl: to sleep with her husband, work for him and produce sons.

Bearing and bringing up children are all that married women can aspire to in rural India and anyone who has not conceived within the first five years is despised by the husband, his family and even the village elders. A childless wife is deeply shamed if divorce proceedings are begun against her. It is even worse if a second 'wife' is brought into the house for the purpose of breeding. The unproductive wife is doomed never to leave the house, even after death, for it is believed that her tormented spirit returns to the home to wander in grief through the rooms.

Phoolan Devi was put immediately to work, fetching the water, tending the cattle, cooking, just as before, only now she also had to submit to a man she hardly knew. It was an alien household; not only was her husband a stranger but she had to adapt to the vagaries of his family. They watched her, assessing her proficiency as a housewife, the women in particular looking for faults. Phoolan Devi had to show great respect to the elders — in the villages the elderly are revered and their opinions highly regarded. Again, she found herself in a rural family and the problems were no less than she had known before.

Soil erosion is as prevalent at Maheshpur as at Gorhapurwa and here too there is a general shortage of able-bodied young men. A few work locally, but many head off for the towns to work — or slink off to the ravines to join up with the dacoits. Sometimes these new bandits steal a neighbour's cow to give to the dacoits, an indication that they are serious about transferring their loyalty. Cattle-stealing is accepted by most villagers as a fact of everyday life; they know that eventually they will be approached and asked to pay *paniyahi* (ransom money).

Although she had been forced to work hard at her parents' home, Phoolan Devi longed to return to Gorhapurwa. She

wanted to go back to her animals and toss corn to the bantams that lived in the cage by the back door. She was out of her territory, and Puttilal was as strict and as harsh as her father. She asked permission to return to Gorhapurwa to visit her parents, but her husband instantly and angrily refused. He had had enough trouble getting her to his house and he was not prepared to let her wander off again. The chores continued, pounding pulse, cooking bread, tending cattle, fetching water, washing and making herself ready for Puttilal each night. Once, she saw him standing at the end of the village with a man and they were pointing at her and laughing. Even the cattle had a better life than her, she thought. And then came news that her mother was seriously ill with a fever. Phoolan begged her husband to allow her to return, but she was again refused. She was now twelve years old, lively, resentful and ready to rebel. Taking the cattle out of the village, she tethered them to a tree and set off along the ravines for Gorhapurwa. When her father saw her at his door and learned that she had run off without permission, he thrashed her. He knew that word would spread that she, his daughter, had disobeyed her husband.

'Go back to him — I will not have you in this house,' shouted Devidin.

'I will stay with my mother. She is sick. She needs me more than he does.'

For three days she nursed her mother and just as she was ready to rise from her bed, Puttilal arrived in the village, his face contorted with anger.

'She will go with you now,' said Devidin.

But Puttilal would not hear of it. Phoolan Devi had shown him great disrespect. His relatives wanted nothing more to do with her, and neither did he. In fact, he wanted Devidin to return the dowry. Divorce was not mentioned, but when a husband asks for his payment to be returned it is an indication that, as far as he is concerned, the marriage is over.

'Take her back,' pleaded Devidin. 'We have no use for her here and if you divorce her it will bring great shame to us.'

'I never want to see her again,' said Puttilal.

He returned to Maheshpur and it was not long before they heard he had remarried. The news prompted Phoolan's parents to insist that she also remarry, but, showing the defiance that had plagued Devidin and Moola in the past, she said she would not go through that again. In fact, the girl was furious that Puttilal had rejected her and was determined to regain her position in his household, new wife or no new wife.

But when she mentioned her intentions to Devidin he was horrified. He realised that Puttilal and his wife and their in-laws would see her return as a form of begging and once more shame would be brought upon his family. This daughter was a problem. He needed advice on how to deal with her. Within a few days, the village elders held a meeting to discuss the difficult and disobedient Phoolan Devi. The elders saw only one solution — Phoolan should go to the home of her father's elder brother, Gurudayal Kewat, who had once lived in the family home with all his relatives, but who had now moved out into his own house. It was not a perfect answer.

When Devidin told Phoolan Devi that she would be taken to her uncle's house, she said she could never live under the same roof as her cousin Maiyadin. The son of her father's brother despised her, regarding her as an uncouth tomboy. He had called her names and she had fought him, pulling his hair and spitting in his face. No, he did not want Phoolan in his house and she did not want to soil her feet on the same ground that he walked on. But it was the decision of the elders. She had to go. They were months of anguish for the girl. Her cousin taunted her, telling her how ugly she was with her stubby nose and thick lips and that defiant snarl. She wanted to fly at him, but she restrained herself. Much as she wanted to leave, she understood now that there was really nowhere she could go. There would, she realised, be difficulties in trying to return to Puttilal. And if she went back to her family home, the pressures on her to remarry someone of their choice, perhaps another old man, would be enormous.

For four months Maiyadin and his father abused her and worked her like a slave. She did the work reluctantly and

halfheartedly, so that finally Maiyadin insisted she be kicked out. His father pointed out that the village elders had ruled she must stay with them, but Maiyadin, strong enough to overrule his elderly father, said he could stand her presence no longer. The morning after this family confrontation, Maiyadin pushed Phoolan Devi out of the door and set off with her towards Maheshpur, Puttilal's village. In that short period at Maiyadin's house, Phoolan Devi had become harder, more defiant. And she had learned a lot. She saw the extent of the land owned by her uncle and compared it with the tiny plot her father possessed. She remembered her father talking about how he had been cheated by his brother. She did not understand the legalities of the situation, but she had heard her uncle talking about a dispute over land; heard him saying how he would never give up his share.

Now, as she walked back to Maheshpur with her older cousin, she could only think of how much she hated these relatives. The psyche of the ravines was already at work. One day, she would take her revenge.

Maiyadin took Phoolan straight to Puttilal's house and shoved her through the door.

'That's rid of you,' he said. 'Never return to Gorhapurwa, you ugly bitch.'

Puttilal was sickened to find Phoolan back in his house. An immediate and fierce row broke out between Phoolan Devi, Puttilal and the *sautan*, his new wife. The *sautan* wanted her out, but Puttilal realised there was nowhere the girl could go. Phoolan could stay as long as she got down to work. She saw the hatred in the eyes of the *sautan* as she dared Phoolan ever to set foot into the room where she slept with her husband. The relatives of Puttilal's wife were shocked to learn that Phoolan Devi had returned — with his recent marriage they had considered his domestic problems to be over. They stopped short of asking him to order her out, but schemed with the *sautan* to make life utterly miserable for her. Then she would leave. Apart from bringing shame to Puttilal's family, his relatives believed her presence tainted the whole village. This girl was fast gaining a reputation as a trouble-

maker — a scruffy stump of humanity whose parents had been happy to have her off their hands, who had run away from her husband and who had created havoc in her uncle's home. And now, here she was back on their doorstep causing more family dissent. There was talk, too, that she had been sleeping around. Elder members of the caste had heard the stories and frowned upon all those associated with her.

Puttilal's relatives certainly did not want to be ostracised by the caste group. They were well aware that it was the custom of the villages to hold families and relatives responsible should a woman be found violating the sexual *mores*. Community action was always softened after a time and the cold shoulder removed following a *pangat* (community dinner) but Puttilal's people did not want to be troubled with such trying procedures. It was better to make life so unbearable for Phoolan Devi that she simply walked out.

She became a slave for five families, waking at four and working right through the day until after dusk. There was not a moment's rest and when she failed to complete a task she was beaten and cursed. Even Puttilal punched her in the face one day and made her nose bleed, and his wife spat on the ground wherever Phoolan walked. The whole village was talking about her, calling her the village slut, for all rumour is accepted as truth. She was one against many and had no means of defending her reputation against the wagging tongues. Astonishingly, she stayed, putting up with the ill treatment, the curses and the beatings for more than three years until the strain became too much, not for her, but for Puttilal. He decided she would have to return to her uncle.

News that Phoolan Devi was on the way spread rapidly around Gorhapurwa. Maiyadin quickly rounded up his relatives, ushered them into the house and closed the door, while he waited outside. A small crowd of villagers followed Puttilal and Phoolan Devi as they approached the house. Maiyadin folded his arms and stared defiantly into the girl's face. Sensing a dangerous situation, Puttilal hurriedly turned and pushed his way back through the crowd. Phoolan stared

at her cousin, saying nothing. Then she, too, turned and headed off. At her father's house she would at least find food and shelter.

Her mother welcomed her with open arms and wept on her shoulder. Her father heaved a great sigh and went off to his brickmaking. Her younger sister, Ramkali, was no longer at home — she had been married. But there were two new daughters and Phoolan was delighted to see them for the first time. She was surprised to find out how much her brother, Shivnarain, had grown.

Phoolan settled back under the family roof and heard her father's grumbles about how the soil was deteriorating every year. Last year's vegetable crop had been poor and this year he expected it to be worse. He talked of how he should rightfully have more of the ancestral land, but his brother, Gurudayal, had duped him with the papers. He, Devidin, had ended up with 2 *bighas* of land and Gurudayal had 40.

Feuds over land are common. Hilly tracts, uneven forest growth, outdated cultivation methods and the spreading ravines have made arable land scarce; it is a commodity to fight and die for. The least land is owned by the low-caste groups. Around sixteen per cent of those living in the valley, most of them from the Sudra caste, have no land at all, but nearly all members of the Brahmin and Kshatriya castes own plots, some as much as 100 acres. Under the Ceiling on Agricultural Holdings Act, nobody can acquire more than 25 standard acres per family, apart from inherited land. Usually, there are no authoritative land records and field boundaries often change during monsoons, when landmarks are swept away. Nearly everyone in the villages has a grudge — they do not possess enough land. Much of the dissension echoes back to the early 1950s when, under new land reforms relating to statutory tenancies, there were massive forcible evictions of low-caste tenants. These reforms created great bitterness in a region where 90 per cent of the population depends on agriculture. Often, disputes are examined at village level and, although decisions are reached, the loser continues to harbour a grudge.

Phoolan understood her father's desperate need to gain more land from his brother. The family income was about 30 rupees a month (about US $3.00) and it was becoming increasingly difficult to live. It was the same story in other houses, other villages. The government's Community Development Programme and rural reconstruction schemes that have brought impressive changes to other rural parts of the country have not spread into the valley, partly because government officials fear kidnapping by dacoits. So most of the valley inhabitants struggle on as their ancestors before them, still growing the conventional two crops a year: the *rabi* crop of barley, *dhal* and wheat from November to March and the *kharif* crop of millets and maize from August to October. Money-spinning crops like tobacco, cotton, oilseeds and sugar cane are not grown because of the unsuitability of the soil.

Life is very mediaeval; bullocks are still used to pull water from the wells, dehusk the grain, till the land and cart off the produce. Change, if any, reaches the remote villages over a long period of time and small farmers, like Devidin, resist fertilisers, pesticides and improved seeds, even if they can afford them. Farmers who do see the usefulness of new products are discouraged because they know the advantages are offset by poor irrigation, the principal source of which is rainwater from the monsoon. Throughout the valley, land is irrigated during the dry period by water drawn from wells, ponds and canals. In some places, wells have to be sunk 250 feet in order to draw seepage water, and because water is scarce wells used solely for irrigation are rare. The few that are used for this purpose are part of a laborious system under which bullocks pull up the water in large leather buckets. These are then emptied into open earthen channels which zig-zag their way to the fields. Other attempts to water the fields have included the setting up of irrigation tanks, which have not proved successful because of the low rainfall; and the construction of canals, which are often far from the villages.

Villagers' hopes lie in the south-west monsoons following

the baking hot weather of May and June. But the quantity of rainfall is small — little more than an average fourteen inches — and villagers have accepted that their lives will be spent under conditions of near drought. That is why the villages have sprung up along the riversides even though, ironically, the rivers eat the soil which the farmers try to irrigate.

Phoolan Devi decided to remain with her family and told her father she would do what she could to help him get his land. Devidin had already taken his case to the village *panchayat* (an assembly restricted to members of one caste for overseeing problems and enforcing social codes) and had got nowhere. The land should have been equally divided at the time of Phoolan's grandfather's death, but there had been some questionable documents that Gurudayal had presented and he had been awarded a large chunk of the land. Phoolan asked the village elders to sit again and consider the case. They gathered in a large house in the centre of the village and the young woman argued excitedly on her father's behalf. The elders were stunned by her knowledge of the affair and impressed by her enthusiastic presentation. But documents were documents, they finally stated, and the land would remain with Gurudayal. Although she had lost the case, Phoolan Devi had made a mark among the elders. They had heard bad things about her, but in fighting for her father's rights she had shown herself to be a strong, independent woman who was prepared to stand firm for what she believed in.

Her cousin Maiyadin was enraged: Phoolan was indeed a troublemaker, for she had now ingratiated herself among the elders when previously it was he who had been seen as a formidable personality in the village. Maiyadin plotted. He had seen Phoolan in the company of Indrajit, another cousin, and decided to use their occasional friendship to blacken her name. Phoolan Devi, he let it be known, had been involved in an incestuous relationship with Indrajit, who was now in another village and unable to deny the vicious gossip.

Social codes governing incest are strictly adhered to in the Chambal Valley, not so much because the villagers

understand the risks of inbreeding, but because they have been brought up to see the act as evil. For the upper castes, it is morally wrong for a man to marry or have sex with a woman from the same tribe, whereas the subcastes expect marriages to occur within the same tribe or community. Customarily, no-one should have sex with, or marry, a girl who is related to him through a common male ancestor up to the seventh generation in the father's lineage and up to the fifth generation in the mother's.

Because of his standing in the village, Maiyadin's gossip was accepted as fact: Phoolan Devi was a vile creature who had absolutely no morals. This talk reached the ears of Sokchand, son of the village *sarpanch* (political representative), who decided he had nothing to lose by seeking her favours. Crossing her path on the edge of the village late one afternoon, he asked her to step into the field with him. When she angrily refused and spat at him, he grabbed her and tried to pull her off the path. She fought and scratched and, breaking free, ran to the village, pursued by her attacker. Catching up with her near the village centre, he beat her with a shoe, screaming to the gathering crowd that she was a prostitute who had accosted him. Tearfully, she denied it, but who was to be believed — a rebellious teenager said to have slept around with all and sundry, or the son of the *sarpanch*?

It was time for Phoolan Devi, the girl nobody wanted, to leave her village again. It had been decided to send her to another relative. Her mother was in tears, but her father gave her no support or encouragement. He simply let her go. She climbed aboard a boat which ferried her across the Yamuna and walked to the home of a cousin who lived in Tyoga village. The family showed her great compassion, but Phoolan wanted no sympathy. She had learned that to be subservient got her nowhere.

Helping out in her cousin's home, she made many new friends, a number of whom she knew to be dacoits. They were men of good cheer, noisy and laughter-filled, and Phoolan got on well with them. She liked their easy camaraderie and they, in turn, were quick to respond to the girl's tomboy spirits and

bawdy wit. More than once they asked her to come away with them but life in Tyoga held much happiness for Phoolan and she was not interested in trading it in for another just then. Daily, she would drive the buffalo to the fields where she would remain, free, until nightfall when it was time to return to the village.

Early one morning a young Mallah, Kailash, was washing his clothes in the river when a girl emerged from the fields where she had been grazing some beasts, and strolled to the river's edge, just 30 yards downstream. There she proceeded to strip off her clothes and enter the water up to her thighs. Kailash watched silently. But soon his soapsuds drifted down and swirled about her and she looked up and saw him. Now, he thought, there will be a terrible row. She will curse me and her relatives will beat me. To his surprise, she stepped out of the water and, walking casually along the riverbank towards him, asked if she could use his soap.

Spellbound, Kailash handed it to her and she re-entered the river and began to lather her body. He watched her rub the soap over her breasts and between her thighs. The young man peeped around furtively to see who else might be enjoying this extraordinary scene of naked abandon, but could see no-one; it was a quiet part of the river. When, at last, she left the water and came and sat with him on a rock, Kailash could resist temptation no longer and took her hand and led her into the pulse field. Kailash was to remember later: 'She had a sexual appetite that I had never known before.'

They met often by the river and Phoolan fell passionately in love with Kailash who was obsessed with her, too. She was determined to become his wife and was dismayed to learn one day that he was already married with children. Furious that he had not told her, she resolved to continue the relationship anyhow, and began to scheme to get him for herself. She knew what to do — withhold her favours. To Hindus, sex is one of the most enjoyable things in life and an Indian woman establishes a strong hold on her husband through the union of lovemaking. It is her armour against his family and the

temptations of the outside world. The Indian scriptures are quite definite that 'women enjoy sex eight times as much as men' and Phoolan Devi knew that Kailash, who was enjoying her more than his wife, was under her spell.

When she refused him, his frustrated passion pleased her and the more she turned away, the more he insisted on meeting her. The strain was beginning to tell; Kailash was at the same time hungry for her and terrified his family would find out. He tried not to see her but after a few days his resolve weakened and he arranged to meet her in Gohani, a nearby village. The lovers spent a happy day with friends of Kailash. Among them was a tall, moustachioed rake named Vikram Mallah whose eyes followed Phoolan everywhere.

'Who was he?' Phoolan Devi asked as they walked back along the dusty trail to Tyoga.

'Vikram Mallah? He's a dacoit. All those men we were with ... they are all dacoits.'

'And you?'

'I am just a husband.'

She laughed. 'It's a pity you aren't mine.'

Kailash was silent for the rest of the walk. When she bade him farewell, it was with such careless abandon that he sensed she did not want to see him again. She had taken him to the edge of madness. He had to do something. Suddenly he said, 'Be here tomorrow.'

He was waiting when she arrived. He had a small plastic bag with him.

'We are going to Kanpur,' he said. 'We are going to be married.'

She did not ask about his family. She didn't care. She had got him on her terms. It was all going to be all right. They walked to the railway station at Kalpi and caught a train to the industrial city, 80 miles away. Kailash had friends there and they stayed in a tiny room while he negotiated with a lawyer. They went to the cinema — the first time she had seen a film — and they walked around the streets looking at the shops. At last, Kailash's lawyer said everything was arranged. They each signed a piece of paper and he declared that they were

now legally married. Phoolan saw Kailash hand over some rupee notes.

That night, she gave herself to him as his wife. But they could not stay in Kanpur for ever. Kailash said they would have to inform their families. He took her back to his village and, leading her into his house, told his wife that he was taking in another woman. Kailash's wife flew at Phoolan Devi, trying to scratch out her eyes. And when Kailash stepped between them, she tried to tear out his. When his parents arrived to see what the commotion was all about, there were more screams and shouts. They were furious and began slapping Phoolan Devi, finally succeeding in shoving her out of the door.

'We moved out and slept in the fields,' Kailash was to recall. 'She took to it naturally, but I could see there was no point in going on like this. I told her to go back to her family, because I was going back to mine. "I will kill you for this," she said to me and she really frightened me. Never before had I felt such hatred coming from a person.'

# CHAPTER FIVE

EVERY VILLAGER in the Chambal Valley has had experience of dacoits. He may have been raided by them, have harboured them or have seen a member of his family embrace the profession. Some families are even proud that a son has run off to the ravines and become a *baghi* — it adds to their social prestige. Victims of the roaming bands call them dacoits (robbers) but villagers who profit from them in some way or who have relations among them see them only as rebels fighting an unfair administrative system.

For the Chambal Valley is still a feudal bastion where rebellion, whether it be against a neighbour, another village of a different caste or the authorities, is a time-worn way of life. While revenge and retribution, added to famine and economic deprivation, are the forces which drive men to take up banditry, the region's topography provides another reason: the 2000 square miles of gorges are an excellent hiding-place.

Almost always, a villager takes to the ravines when the police are called in after he has committed a minor offence — violence against a neighbour, a theft or a wrongful arrest. Such is the general fear and mistrust of the authorities whose clumsy handling of minor aberrations can mean months of lingering in jail, or worse.

In January 1979, three police officers arrived in Gorha-purwa village and told Phoolan Devi she was under arrest. Her cousin Maiyadin had accused her of stealing. She protested; on the day the theft was said to have occurred, she had been out in the fields. It was no use. Phoolan was bundled into a jeep and taken to the nearest police station at Kalpi. A

poor village girl, with no chance of bribing her way out, she was thrown into a cell and left for two days. When the police squeezed her breasts and kissed her, she swore at them and struggled furiously until finally they left her alone, content with slinging verbal abuse.

Then a leering officer told her she would be charged with theft, not only from her cousin, but from the village elder, Kishna. Her cousin further accused her of tipping off dacoits who had burgled his house while no-one was at home. Phoolan Devi screamed her innocence, but she was slapped and pushed back into the cell. In the morning, she was told, she would be taken to court at Auraiya and the charges would be read out. The dazed teenager sat in the corner of the cell she shared with three dacoits and considered her position. There was nothing she could do; no-one she could turn to. They had all ganged up against her: Maiyadin, his father, the *sarpanch* and his son. And the police. Their filthy hands had been all over her.

In the morning, she was taken to court. The decision was that she would be remanded in custody until the authorities were ready to proceed with the charges. She was taken to the Auraiya jail, searched, sexually manhandled and locked into another dark cell. Phoolan Devi had nothing left to lose. She had been tossed from person to person, thrashed and beaten, falsely charged and sexually abused. She pushed aside the bowl of gruel they had given her, pulled her knees up to her forehead and wept until no tears were left.

Her father, feeling at last some responsibility towards his daughter, appealed to his employers, Narain Singh and Jaikaran Singh, for help. He had virtually to get on his knees to beg, for he was a mere Sudra and they were Thakurs, a subcaste of the higher Kshatriyas. He pleaded for days until at last they consented to bail Phoolan Devi out of jail. She had been behind bars for nearly three weeks when the Singhs picked her up and took her back to Narihan, their village. The girl was passive and withdrawn but not without some gratitude to her saviours. Seeing how helpless she was gave the Singhs some ideas of their own.

They forced her into a house and tore her clothes off. The girl begged for mercy, and when she realised there was to be none, began to scream hysterically. It was too much for the brothers, who punched and kicked her until she stopped and fell back bruised and bloodied, all resistance beaten out of her. After 24 hours of humiliation, she managed to escape and made for Tyoga, Kailash's village. Ignoring the shrill protests of his wife and relatives, she begged Kailash to find her a roof. She was ill, hungry and tired and far too weak to make it back to Gorhapurwa.

Her second husband was in a fix. After the commotion she'd caused, he dare not ask a neighbour to help. No woman in the village would have her in the house. Kailash had only one recourse. As Phoolan Devi hung around outside waiting, he sent word to his dacoit friends.

They arrived on a bullock cart and took her into the ravines. After a short distance they abandoned the cart and proceeded on foot. The girl followed silently, stumbling over the tussocky grass, tripping on stones, until at last they reached a cluster of makeshift tents, outside which sat a group of men. Vikram Mallah, the dacoit she had met at Gohani before her marriage to Kailash, stepped forward to greet her.

'So, Phoolan Devi, you have come to me.'

She remained mute. The dacoits took little notice of her, but when it was mealtime gave her a bowl of pulse. Left alone, Phoolan Devi had plenty of time to reflect — and hate. She would never forget what the Thakurs had done. But if she thought she would now be spared sexual abuse, she was wrong. Babu Gujar, leader of the gang, was standing in front of her, picking his teeth. He eyed her for a time then, reaching down, grabbed her arm, twisting it cruelly and bringing her to her feet with a yelp. There was a burst of laughter from his men. The girl knew what he wanted. She had resisted before and had been beaten for it. Dumbly, she let him take her to his tent.

He was fierce; his demands shocked her. When, at last, he fell asleep she lay drained and terror-stricken. She was with the dacoits — sleeping with one. She was already in trouble

with the police. If she was caught with the gang she could be shot. The valley echoed with stories of dacoits being gunned down mercilessly by police who were out for the bounty on their heads. Her mind was in a turmoil. She wanted to go home, to be away from the bristle-faced *baghi* who had just defiled her. Despite her tiredness, she could not sleep. She had to leave. As Babu snored on, she slipped quietly from the tent and indicated to the guard she was going to relieve herself. Walking around the first hillock into the darkness she ran and ran.

She was happy back in the village attending to the household chores and caring for her younger sisters and ten-year-old brother Shivnarain. She adored her brother, although she had had little contact with him. Being the male offspring in the family he was given every attention. Shivnarain could do no wrong, unlike his older sister who never seemed to do anything right. But Phoolan felt no animosity; she found him now to be a lot of fun and she felt protective towards him. They tended the buffalo together and played *kabaddi* (an Indian style of wrestling) and laughed a lot. Although there were only six years between them, Phoolan felt like a mother to him. She had no children of her own, when most teenagers she had played with as a child were now married with several. Sometimes Phoolan Devi and Shivnarain travelled by bullock cart to Auraiya, where her case still dragged on. She would appear in court and be again remanded. She dare not say a thing against the Thakurs who had taken advantage of her because they were still standing surety.

Travelling to the court was unpleasant now because the monsoon rains were upon them. In the *shravan* everything stopped. The fields and villages were deserted, although the animals still had to be tended by a few. When Phoolan wasn't travelling between Gorhapurwa and Auraiya, it was her job to go into the fields to watch the buffalo and a white cow which she treated as a pet. She sometimes suffered badly from fever and it did not help that she was often wet for days.

One evening in July 1979, during a downpour, the village

elder's servant ran sodden into the house and warned them that a gang of dacoits was camped at the riverside. A villager had heard them planning a raid but one of the gangsters had also been heard to say, 'Who is this Phoolan Devi, anyway? She is only a woman and should not be causing so much trouble. Let's go and get her and chop off her nose.'

Nose-chopping was usually a punishment meted out to unfaithful wives in the primitive parts of India. There were several women in the valley who had been disfigured by a wrathful husband. The sword or knife rarely struck true: often, lips were sliced off or part of the face. Some women bled to death.

Terrified, and at the urging of her parents, Phoolan Devi slipped from the house and ran the three miles to Kalpi police station. She hated having to turn to the police, but she was concerned not only for her own safety but her family's. Drenched to the skin, she woke the officer in charge and told him she was afraid her family was about to be attacked. This was one of the men who had molested her when she was arrested. She ignored his leer and begged him to send help to the village. He grinned and said he would. Phoolan Devi set off back for Gorhapurwa through the rain.

On arrival at the house she saw the cattle and her favourite cow standing wet through and looking very miserable. She couldn't bear to see them forgotten. Almost dropping with exhaustion, she took them to a dry area and covered them up before going inside. As if nothing had happened, the rest of the family had gone to sleep. She was too tired to eat, so she put on some dry clothes and curled up on her bed in the corner. Two hours later, the village elder's servant tapped at the door and pushed it open. From under a pile of clothing she had pulled over herself Phoolan saw four men enter.

'Phoolan Devi,' they called. 'Phoolan Devi, where are you?'

She lay very still. She recognised the voices of Babu Gujar and Vikram Mallah.

'Phoolan Devi, we have come for you.'

In a corner, Phoolan's brother moved. The visitors pulled

him from his bed. The boy started to scream as the dacoits pushed him towards the door.

'We will take him instead!'

She could stay silent no longer.

'Leave him! I will go with you.'

Her parents were in the room on the next tier. They said nothing. It was useless to interfere and to try to do so could cost them their lives. Devidin recognised their voices. Babu Gujar was quick-tempered and although he had nothing against Devidin he could just as easily shoot him down as let him live.

Flanked by the dacoits, Phoolan walked out into the wet night. She heard Babu Gujar say:

'Are we going to cut off her nose, or not?'

She turned to look back at the house. It was too dark to see whether her relations were there in the doorway, but she knew they would be. And so would the elder's servant. He would spread the word around that Phoolan Devi had gone off with the dacoits and no matter what was about to happen to her she knew that the feeling in the village would be that she had chosen her own destiny. She knew that this time, if she lived at all, if she was not too badly mutilated, she could never return. And then she heard them wailing back at the house. Her brother, her sister, her mother and . . . was that her father? Was her father crying for her, too? She would always remember that moment, when you could have flooded the rivers with the tears they all shed at parting.

They came to a boat on the riverbank. She was told to get in.

'We won't kill her yet,' said Babu Gujar. 'I'm in the mood for a woman tonight.'

Vikram Mallah argued that it was he who should sleep with her. It had been his decision to come and fetch her, after all.

'You will not cross me, Vikram Mallah! You are forgetting that I already know the shape of this woman's ass.'

They were still arguing when they reached the far bank. Phoolan Devi was shoved along in the darkness. She told them there was no need for that; she was coming willingly. At

the camp, with the other dacoits sitting around nearby, she was thrown under a canvas awning. Vikram protested that he should be allowed to sleep with the girl but as he saw his chances slipping away against the authority of Babu Gujar he tried a different tack: they should send her packing immediately and move camp. She had already run away once. How could they be sure she would not do it again and reveal their whereabouts to the authorities? Had she not already been seen running to the police that same night?

Babu Gujar spun to face Phoolan Devi. She was petrified; she knew she could be shot in an instant. He grabbed at the front of her sari and tore it down, exposing her breasts.

'This is all I want,' he roared. The dacoits laughed. Except Vikram.

'Either kill her or leave her alone,' he said.

Despite their total disregard of the law, many *baghis* respect the sexual *mores* that exist in the villages. Leaders of established gangs, in particular, try to ensure that their comrades do not indulge in sexual vagrancies in villages falling within their domain. Man Singh, one of the most famous dacoits of them all, a ruthless, God-fearing, tyrannical yet magnanimous man who had committed nearly 200 murders before he was shot dead in 1955, believed strongly in the protection of women. When one of his lieutenants began to tease a girl at the community well while the gang was passing through a village, Man Singh raised his rifle and shot him dead.

Vikram Mallah, while happy enough to enjoy the pleasures of a woman in private, objected to public humiliation. He was still protesting when Babu Gujar threw Phoolan Devi to the ground in the rain and, in front of the gang, raped her. As they rolled in the mud she bit and scratched and the more she screamed the more he laughed. When she tried to twist away, he twined his fingers in her hair and yanked her head back.

'I'll break your neck, you fucking bitch!' he swore.

Once, she managed to get up onto her knees but he grabbed her feet and sank his teeth into her thigh, drawing blood. Deftly flipping her over on her back he forced her legs open

so that she felt she was splitting in two. She struck at him blindly, screaming with hate and rage. And he laughed and laughed. When he had finished with her, he gave her a hard kick saying, 'If you run away I'll go back and kill your little pig of a brother.' Then he walked off.

It was the beginning of three days of horror for the girl. Twice a day, as they moved through the ravines, Babu Gujar ravished Phoolan Devi in the presence of the gang. Vikram Mallah constantly objected, but to take away the pleasure from these men could mean their turning against him and gunning him down. He hated what they were doing, yet felt powerless to help. His moral stance was not unusual — the promiscuous, brash behaviour of some gang leaders often caused dissent among their men. Amrit Lal, a fearsome dacoit chief who was constantly breaking out of jail in the 1940s and 50s, had an insatiable sexual hunger, particularly after he had been drinking, and his womanising prompted a gang member to tell him to go easy in the way he handled the ladies. Amrit Lal laughed in his face and the next mement he fell to the ground, seriously wounded by the gun of his long-standing colleague. The dacoit was immediately shot by Amrit Lal's other men. Despite this warning, the gang leader continued to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh on his recovery and this was to lead to his eventual death. Another dacoit was shocked by Amrit Lal's promiscuous behaviour with his own sister. While the leader lay asleep under a tree one day with his relative, they were both shot dead by the aggrieved bandit.

Towards the end of the third day of Phoolan Devi's humiliation, Vikram Mallah decided he could put up with it no more. While camped near a temple, a few miles from Auraiya, he marched defiantly up to Babu Gujar and told him to stop abusing the girl in front of the men. Babu, like Amrit Lal of old, laughed in his subordinate's face.

'Abuse!' he shouted. 'I'll show you abuse!' And he strode purposefully towards Phoolan Devi, unbuckling his trouser belt. Vikram raised his rifle. 'Do not walk another step!'

But Babu Gujar made the mistake of running towards his

own gun. Vikram Mallah squeezed the trigger, killing the leader with a single shot. Two of Babu's associates raised their weapons, but Vikram gunned them down, too. Then he walked over to Phoolan Devi and said simply, 'I now claim you as mine.'

She looked at him for a moment, then said, 'How can a property protest?'

Back at Gorhapurwa, Phoolan's mother was heartbroken. She asked Devidin to report their daughter's abduction to the police, but he said there would be nothing they could do. Phoolan Devi was gone and that was that. But Moola felt she had to do something, so she walked to Kalpi police station to lodge a complaint of kidnapping. The officers refused to register the case.

'We want nothing to do with your family,' Moola was told. 'Now get out.'

Phoolan Devi's mother was one of several village women to lose a daughter to the ravines. The leaders of dacoit gangs sometimes took women around with them, although most considered they were bad luck. In addition, they slowed their progress and offered too much of a distraction. When a woman was attached to a gang leader, he was constantly aware that his men would be quick to seize an opportunity to have their way with her, knowing that she would never tell because she would also be punished. Those who did become a bandit's 'kept' could expect to be handed around at whim if the head man so desired.

Since 1950, a handful of women have actually taken to professional dacoity themselves, accompanying gangs on raids. Of the two or three who took over and made names as leaders, Putli Bai was undoubtedly the most colourful.

The willowy dancing girl was born into a Muslim prostitute family in Morena, an area renowned for its number of peacocks, just south of Agra. She was a *nautchgirl* (a dancer) by profession and while on her way to a village for a performance, was accosted by a notorious dacoit, Sultan Gujar, a remorseless killer who roamed the valley with .303

rifles and shotguns. Sultan, after an enchanting night with Putli, decided she should be his 'kept' and she began travelling everywhere with the gang of fifteen.

The pressures of being always on the run from the police became too much for her and she returned to her family. However, Putli could not forget the strikingly handsome Sultan and in time sent a message saying she would like to rejoin him. Accepted back into the fold, she again roamed with the gang until, in 1953, they were surrounded by the police. As bullets flew, she made her escape and, concerned that she would be relentlessly hunted by the authorities, walked into a police station and gave herself up. While on bail, she compared her life in town with the adventures of the ravines and decided, once again, to link up with Sultan. This time, there could be no going back. Her role with the gang changed, too: she learned how to shoot and took an active part in robberies and murder.

In May 1955, the gang was involved in another shoot-out with the police. This time, Sultan Gujar was shot dead. Several gang members escaped, including Putli, and she became the woman of the new chief, Babu Lohari. But Babu had hardly had time to assert his authority when the dacoits walked into another police ambush. Again, Putli had an amazing escape, while her new man was shot dead. Unable to return to her home town, Putli joined up with a gang operated by another big dacoit, Rupa, but her time as his 'kept' was to be short-lived. For a start, she had tainted herself by sleeping with men of a lower caste than he — and there was another dacoit who, on hearing of her exploits, wanted her. He was Kalla Gujar, who had broken away from yet another gang and formed his own. Not only did he want Putli: he wanted to get his hands on the weapons she had inherited from Sultan. She had taken the precaution of hiding them before running with Babu and Rupa because she knew that once the guns were handed out she would have no hope of recovering them.

Kalla won Putli's confidence and she agreed to join his gang as co-leader. Putli had learned to ride and shoot as well as the best of them and was regarded by the police as a

fearsome opponent. She was merciless with informers who worked against her, gunning them down as she charged through the villages on her horse. In 1956, Putli's gang was engaged in a fierce encounter with the police and a bullet ripped into her left hand, tearing it to shreds. Collapsing from the pain, she nevertheless managed to ride to freedom. From the trail of blood she left behind, the police knew she had been hit and would probably die. But Putli had many sympathisers in the valley. As she lay in a village perilously ill from loss of blood, medical help was arranged, at enormous expense. In a crude operation without anasthetic, what was left of her hand was amputated. She did not want her authority to die in the three months necessary for her recovery, so she despatched a young boy, dressed exactly like her, on gang raids, which caused confusion in press and police circles.

When she returned to active dacoity, her appearance was spectacular. She rode into villages on horseback, supporting the rifle on the stump of her arm and firing with the ride, while still maintaining her balance. She was involved in several more battles with the police and even managed to hit a sub-inspector in the head from 100 yards. Her exploits came to a sudden end in 1958. Tipped off about the movements of another gang leader, Lakhan Singh, police spread out around a spot on the left bank of the Kunwari River, running parallel to the Chambal River. A cloud of dust rising above the nearby hillocks suggested their information had been correct. But it was Putli and Kalla and their gang who by chance were passing along the same route. They rode straight into the ambush. Putli ran for cover and shouted instructions to the gang. The gunfight raged for nearly four hours and when the echo of the shots finally faded, Putli and ten other gang members lay dead. Kalla managed to get away, but he was shot dead shortly afterwards, unaware of the fate of his woman.

Later, an official police record said of her: 'In the villages of central India people will sing folk songs for years about the exploits of a willowy dancing girl who became a dacoit and

terrorised the countryside with murder and robbery. Death has wiped out our scores against her. Her cruelty and ruthlessness will be forgotten, but what will be remembered is the fearless courage of this woman, who endured much and suffered much but lived her own life as the leader of a desperate band of outlaws.'

A police inspector commented after her death, 'She was the queen of bandits. No-one will be able to take her place.'

He could not foresee events that were to take place more than twenty years later.

Putli was not the beginning and certainly not the end of women bandits. A new generation of them was to surface, although they were small-time and their lives of crime were generally short-lived. They were killed in police encounters, were captured, or simply gave up when they found out how tough life in the ravines was. Most of the women dacoits belonged to the rural poor and were totally illiterate. Usually, they ran off with the outlaws because of ill treatment by husbands and in-laws, and while some were content to serve as mistresses of the leaders, one or two carved a place for themselves as active members of gangs.

A classic case of a woman spurned was Phoolshee, wife of a village chief in the Etawah district, on the right bank of the Yamuna. She joined the outlaws at the age of 30 because her husband showed favouritism to his first wife. And Geeta Thakur ran off to the ravines when she was 22 because she admired her criminal brother-in-law and despised her docile, law-abiding husband. Another woman bandit earned the name Kapoori Chainwali because, unable to shoot straight, she used a bicycle chain as her weapon.

Bijli was not much use with a gun, either. She joined a gang but was captured by police ten days later without a single shot being fired. Kamala lasted a full year before she was captured after a series of robberies. Chunni made a name for herself as a hold-up specialist on the Rajasthan-Haryana border and once, when the police came to help the passengers of a bus she had stopped, her gang held up the police, too, and took their guns.

A cruel streak ran through most of them. Kuntala, who was killed in 1975, was said in a police dossier to be a merciless woman who would gouge out her victims' eyes before shooting them; and Munni, who surrendered to Rajasthan police in 1977, said her only regret was that she could not 'cut the noses, ears and throats of my in-laws and punish my weak husband'.

A year later, the country was shocked by the treatment of 26-year-old Haseena, bandit or not. Uttar Pradesh police claimed she had been shot dead in a gun battle. The Madhya Pradesh authorities, who tended to be less trigger-happy than their colleagues across the border, said she had been shot after she had surrendered. Whatever the circumstances of her death, the district authorities of Tikamgarh stripped her and propped her naked body up on public display.

# CHAPTER SIX

SRIRAM and Lalaram Singh, serving time in jail for robbery, were the butchers of the Chambal Valley. The Thakur brothers had a frightening reputation for chopping their victims to pieces, but the police had little evidence against them because relatives of the mutilated were too frightened to talk. Two years later, after their release, the authorities were to have all the evidence they needed that Sriram and his younger brother were perverted hatchet-men.

They sat now in their cell fuming with anger and frustration. The gang over which they once had control had been taken over by a scum of a Sudra, Vikram Mallah. Until their imprisonment they had been among the most feared bandit leaders in modern times, getting away literally with murder because of the terror instilled among witnesses. One of their uncles was among their victims. Wherever they moved they left a trail of misery, and *bàghis* of the Chambal and Bundelkhand made it a policy to keep out of their way. Even the crazed Babu Gujar had been under their command, acting as a lieutenant.

Vikram Mallah, as far as they were concerned, was from the latrines. A former petty thief, he had acted as informer for them on the movements of the police before they admitted him as a junior member of the gang. He was their bagman, being given the task of carrying the group's cooking pots and whatever other supplies they could load on him.

On their imprisonment, Babu Gujar had assumed control and Vikram Mallah was promoted to the rank of lieutenant.

No-one ever thought that such a small-time *baghi* would think so much of himself as to take over leadership of a predominantly Thakur gang.

Any elevation of Sudras into the political sphere leads to fierce resentment among the Brahmins and Kshatriyas and this opposition also occurs in the gangs. Although members of different castes from the leader are not excluded from a gang, resentment persists, particularly if a Thakur, from the Kshatriya caste, finds himself under the leadership of a Sudra.

For the Singh brothers, Vikram Mallah's ascension to power went beyond resentment. They were filled with such deep revulsion when they heard the news that they wanted to smash down the walls of their jail and hunt down the Mallah and slit his throat. To add to their fury, they heard that Vikram Mallah had a woman, Phoolan Devi, also of the Mallah subcaste. During their reign of terror the Singhs had taken a woman with them, Kusuma Nain, whose sexual services were freely given and whom they shared. She was of their own; she had a right to move with the gang. But this Phoolan Devi — she was scum. And she was a risk to the rest of the gang, for those that crawled from the sewers could not be trusted. She was likely, they considered, to inform on all the Thakurs in the group and run off laughing with the dog who shared her bed.

The hatred that pumped through the hearts of Lalaram and Sriram Singh was spawned not only by Vikram Mallah's elevation to leadership. It was in their blood the day they were born, as it had been for generations of Thakurs who had been raised in the badlands of India before them.

Phoolan Devi was beginning to find that life in the ravines had much more to offer than she had imagined. With Babu's death, the threat against her brother had lifted and there was nothing to stop her running home. But she stayed with Vikram because she felt she owed him favours for saving her from the clutches of Babu. And for the first time she had value; she had been worth a man's life. In a way, she had

found a new family in the dozen or so members who made up the gang. As with other *baghi* groups most of the men were married and tried to maintain contact with their wives and children, although visits were a risky business. All of Vikram's gang had been brought up in homes containing large families, often packed with two or three generations. And most had grown up within six miles of the ravines, which stretched out from the riverbanks for only six or seven miles. They had been raised under strict discipline, with frequent severe thrashings. Despite the affinity found between children and their fathers in the rest of the country, nearly all the gang considered their male parents had been too harsh. Their mothers had been kind and affectionate. There was nothing unusual in the fact that neither parent worried too much about 'social training' — their sons and daughters were left to find out for themselves about the rights and wrongs of life.

Phoolan Devi sat around the camp fire with Vikram, a cloth draped over the flames to smother the smoke, and learned about the rules that kept *baghis* alive in the ravines. Whenever possible a scout had to be sent ahead and four guards posted at night. Wheatfields were always good hiding places. On approaching a town they should always break up into ones and twos. Scrap food should never be left behind at an encampment because it attracted birds which alerted police. There should be little or no talk while on the move.

Vikram told her how he really had wanted to cut off her nose on the night they came for her. He had been upset because she had slept with Babu that first time she had come to the camp when he, Vikram, believed she had taken a fancy to him. He had been interested in bedding her since Kailash first raved of her sexual exploits to him. Phoolan Devi was angry about that, but kept her feelings to herself. Later, Vikram had suggested to Babu Gujar that they kidnap her, for it had been his desire to punish her. But it had been fortunate, he laughed, that Babu had been such a pig, giving him reason to kill him and claim her for himself. Now he had a gang and a woman.

'You are lucky, Phoolan Devi,' he said, 'that you have been so readily accepted. It is not easy to come into a gang.'

It was true. There are some who take a while to make up their minds whether they should go to the ravines, while others hurry off. But the initiation period is always long and arduous. One man from Gorhapurwa had to return home because no gang would have him — they said he could not be trusted.

Usually it is easier for 'drifters' to latch onto a gang because they are often engaged in playing the role of informer or food supplier and get to know various dacoit gangs personally. Anyone suddenly turning up in the ravines and begging gang admittance might have a long wait. There are many factors to consider: caste, family background, physical fitness, the applicant's like or dislike of authority, his usefulness with a weapon (army training is an excellent qualification) and the precise reasons for his wanting to turn bandit. Gangs can never be too careful, as the ravines crawl with informers who work on the side of the police. Sometimes, though, the would-be bandit comes with a personal recommendation — he already has a relative in a gang.

Vikram had to ensure that Phoolan Devi remained with him, not only for his sexual requirements but because of security reasons. The only way she could be made to remain in the ravines was to compromise her publicly. He would have to teach her to shoot and how to hide and then she would accompany them on dacoities. Villagers would see her and report to the police. Vikram's intentions followed a common valley practice. Every new recruit has to go on a raid to prove his mettle at some time and when he does, the whole valley, as well as the police, gets to hear of it. Usually, a new recruit is taken to a village where he has an enemy and, in front of the inhabitants, is expected to kill him. If the vendetta is against a village, it is plundered and the newcomer referred to by name several times so the residents know he is there.

Vikram continued his tuition. Phoolan Devi was told never to light a fire during the day and never to think about her family; there was no place for homesick bandits.

'When you steal, you will tell me what you have stolen,' he said. 'Nobody conceals anything from me. If any of us is wounded, you will help to carry him away. You will even help to carry the dead and then we will tell their families and they can come and collect them. And if you are ever arrested, you will not, of course, betray us.'

Gang members arrested in the Chambal Valley are usually helped, anonymously, by their colleagues who make defence funds available to lawyers. Rupa, Putli Bai's paramour, once provided 80,000 rupees for the defence of his henchman, Tehsildar Singh. Witnesses, unless under police guard, are bribed and threatened but the arrested gang member's family is often given financial help — as long as no-one talks.

Phoolan Devi's tasks were to carry Vikram's baggage as they moved through the ravines and help out with guard duties by sitting on a hilltop scouring the surrounding countryside. She was also expected to clean the weapons, do most of the cooking and sleep with her leader. It was not so bad. Vikram was both cruel and kind to her and although she was afraid of him she also liked him: liked him even more than she had Kailash. She was handling guns for the first time, pulling a rag through the barrels, wiping dirt from the mechanism — Vikram told her that several dacoits had lost their lives because their weapons had jammed. Guns were the gangs' most valued possesions. One good rifle was worth all the money they could find in a single village.

Bandits have come a long way in weaponry since the days of the Pindaris and the Kanjars with their swords and spears. The reverberations of muskets and fusils replaced the silent killings of the sharp-edged weapons, followed closely by handguns, both single- and double-barrel. The ultimate in weaponry at the end of the nineteenth century was the .44 twelve-shot Henry Express rifle with its lever action, but shortly after the 1914-1918 war the gangs got their hands on .430 Mauser rifles with their bolt action — weapons that were popularly known as *panch-pheras*, meaning five shots. Lee Enfield rifles of .303 calibre and .455 calibre revolvers also turned up in the hands of the dacoits. The end of the Second

World War saw the introduction of semi-automatic and automatic weapons into the Chambal Valley, including the Thompson Machine Carbine and the Thompson Machine Gun, the sten gun and the bren gun. The guns they gave Phoolan Devi to clean included sophisticated self-loading rifles that were more up-to-date than weapons possessed by the police.

The valley is riddled with weapons that date from the turn of the century to modern times. Though in 1972 511 dacoits had agreed to surrender, only 267 arms were handed in to the police. The authorities were furious, because they knew that every gang member had at least two weapons and that the bandits who were giving up life in the ravines — at least for a while — had either sold their weapons to other *baghis* or had left them with friends in case they were needed again. Ironically, many of the weapons used against the authorities had been lent to civilians by the Indian Army. This was during the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war when army officers had issued weapons to village residents on the border to defend themselves. Many of these guns found their way to the Chambal ravines. And weapons abandoned during the war were collected and sold to dacoit gangs. One SLR (self-loading rifle) lost during the war was found in the possession of a notorious Chambal gang leader, Mohar Singh, just three months later.

For those living on the border of Pakistan, gun-running is a lucrative business; arms smuggled across the frontier are sold to middlemen who trade them to the dacoits, an SLR fetching as much as 15,000 rupees. With loose security arrangements and the power of money, anything is possible. Dacoit Lukka Singh, who surrendered in 1972, told the police, 'A number of people in the army have very good contacts with the people in the ordnance depots. When they come home on leave to towns close to the Chambal Valley they bring guns and cartridges which they sell to make money. This is one important source for *baghis*.'

Acting on a tip-off from an informer, Braj Mohan Singh, an army officer based near Jhansi, was arrested in Gwalior, 45

miles away, in possession of 350 SLR cartridges. He was on his way to meet a middleman.

It is not only the army which provides an 'official' source of weapons. Members of the police who live in the valley also manage to sneak guns through to dacoits, so long as the price is right. One method is to list a number of weapons as missing following an encounter with a gang. The weapons are actually hidden and collected later. A popular negotiating market is at Gwalior, where weapons change hands through an intermediary — strictly for cash. Prices vary depending on the type of weapon, the risk involved, the urgency of the demand and availability.

In addition to army and police weapons, dacoits steal licensed arms held by villagers who are given permission to keep them for their own protection. Dacoits often grab these in raids and also collect *katta*, home-made weapons manufactured by blacksmiths in the back alleys of Agra, Gwalior and Jhansi.

No matter what the weapons are or where they come from, they belong to individual dacoits, not to their gangs as a whole. However, in cases where gang members do not possess a weapon, leaders often lend out one of their own guns, claiming as payment an extra share of the plunder.

One day while camped near the Jamuna River, Vikram and his men kidnapped a villager. Apart from minor lootings, they had not been very active and were running out of money. The prisoner, son of a Thakur landowner, was to be ransomed for 20,000 rupees. Vikram loaded a Mauser and handed it to Phoolan.

'You can pull the trigger if he tries to run away,' he said.

Within two weeks an intermediary had handed over the money and the victim was freed. The gang shared it equally, although this is not usually the case among the dacoits of the ravines. Booty is apportioned according to the type of weapon carried during a dacoity. Under common *baghi* practice, the outlaw with the deadliest arms collects the highest share. Those wielding automatic or semi-automatic weapons are entitled to three shares of loot, a .303 rifle is worth two and a

smooth-bore shotgun one share. A further amount is set aside to be handed out as charity to selected communities. This money buys silence when police start asking questions, but it also pays for villagers' provisions. Another portion goes into the gang's 'kitty'. Anyone who borrows a weapon is expected to donate half his earnings to the owner, normally the gang chief.

Vikram was one of the pioneers of a kidnapping spree which was to sweep through the valley and surrounding towns. In 1979, only 24 cases of kidnapping were reported in Madhya Pradesh, but within the next twelve months the police were to learn of 140. Added to these was an increase in the number of murders from 22 in 1979 to 36 the following year. Certainly dacoit activity had increased at the end of the 1970s and police could only surmise that the bandits' confidence had been increased by the kid-glove treatment given to dacoits who had surrendered in 1972. Perhaps now, police suggested, dacoits believed in the policy of making a quick financial killing and then surrendering. And perhaps new dacoits were looking at the lifestyles of those who had served a jail term and were now out, building houses, running bus companies, checking over their land. Vikram Mallah saw the benefits of kidnapping — it was a get-rich-quick tactic with little risk. Police were usually in the dark until well after the victim was released and returned home. Usually, the families involved did not have ready cash and negotiations lasted for weeks or months. These were carried out through an intermediary, who initially showed great sympathy to the family before eventually dropping a careful hint that negotiations should begin.

With money in their pockets again, Vikram and the gang set off through the ravines in the wake of a scout to visit relatives and friends and seek out new contacts. Having assumed command of the gang, Vikram was out to make a name for himself and was on the lookout for caches of loot. Phoolan accompanied him everywhere for she had, in a sense, become his *chela* (disciple). He was a ruthless master, cunning, conniving and sly, and demanded absolute

allegiance from those who ran with him. He emphasised the necessity for an efficient informer system and for that the payouts had to be generous. Life in the ravines was basic and harsh and the overriding priority was to stay alive; to do that, much depended on the informer. As well as knowing the movements of the police, it was important to keep track of other gangs — if any plunder was to be had, Vikram wanted to be sure he got there first.

Phoolan Devi was a good pupil. Being eager to please Vikram Mallah, she learned quickly and well. At last her spirit had found a direction in which to flow.

Vikram's gang, not out of character with other groups, was intent on creating a good image among the valley residents. When approached by villagers of his own caste, he even assumed the role of arbitrator, listening to the arguments flying backwards and forwards in a dispute and giving his own judgement. On such occasions, his men were posted to various observation points to watch for any unusual goings-on, just in case the police had been forewarned of what was to take place. Sometimes Vikram put his mistress on guard duty and at other times she attended meetings, although as a woman it would never be her lot to adjudicate.

The gang headed back down the Yamuna's east bank and crossed by boat to set up camp near Kalpi. As they were setting out the olive-green tarpaulin and laying out the *durries* (floor covering), Vikram told Phoolan Devi she was to go with them on their next raid. They were going to hit the village of Kiratpur-Deokali and steal food and money.

'You will not kill unless your life is threatened or we are surrounded. Then you will have to try to shoot your way out, but if you are captured you will say nothing.'

It was a good village to attack. Most of the men were planning to visit another hamlet for a meeting and only a handful, plus the women and children, would be left. The risks were low, the potential gains high. The gang would hit sometime in the afternoon of the following day. They would ferry the river in four boats, clean up, and cross back again. Vikram's gang did not use horses — like other groups they

found the animals more of a hindrance than a help on the steep sides of the ravines.

At dawn they offered prayers for the success of the mission. Throughout the valley there is a strong belief in religion and the supernatural. Certain gods, it is thought, favour particular groups, and personal deities are greatly revered. Among those who dwell in and around the ravines, the most common deities are Aghori, Hanuman and Mata.

Those who worship Aghori belong to the lower castes, mainly to the untouchable or scavenger groups. Believers profess complete indifference to worldly objects and say they will eat or drink whatever is handed to them, even rotting flesh and dung. The god's image is represented by a crudely-carved stone statue, not unlike the image of the Goddess Durga. The philosophy attached to Aghori makes life in the ravines relatively easy for low-caste gang members who are little concerned about what feeds the flesh.

South of Agra and around Gwalior, the monkey god, Hanuman, has devotees among the Brahmins and Kshatriyas. Hanuman is said to possess great learning and it is written of him that 'in all sciences, in the rules of austerity, he rivals the preceptor of the gods'. All over the Chambal Valley, Hanuman the divine commands his worshippers to go without cereals on Tuesdays and to offer sweets at his temples which are adorned with his red statue and red flags. The holy shrines are usually overrun with monkeys, Hanuman's representatives. It is regarded as meritorious to feed them, sacrilegious to hurt them.

But the most popular deity of all is Mata, also known as Durga, Karauli Mata, Kali, Mahadevi, Bhairon-Bhawani, Maa Bhagwait, Pathawari Mata, Jagdamba, Sitla Mata, Bajrang Devi and Kankalini. Mediaeval painters depicted her as a golden-coloured woman with a beautiful countenance and ten arms. In one arm she holds a spear which she is plunging into the heart of an evil giant and with another she holds the tail of a serpent. At her feet is a lion who obeys her. Throughout the Chambal Valley and Bundelkhand she is known by the names that represent her most admired aspects.

Around Bhind, north-east of Gwalior, she is known as Bajrang Devi, to emphasise her fighting and winning qualities. In the peacock district of Morena, villagers know her as Pathawari Mata, an acknowledgement of her mountain home. She is commonly known, though, as Karauli Mata, a reference to her favourite weapon, the sword; and she is generally recognised as the fountainhead of fertility and divine power and a champion against evil. Shrines to her are found in various forms in many places. Sometimes they are roughly-hewn stones, like those shaped for Aghori, and placed under trees. In other areas, fabulous temples have been built to honour her, abundant in erotic statues depicting her as an eight-armed maiden with enormous breasts, long legs and big eyes — a symbol of beauty and power. Her devotees expect her to protect them from all evil and to give them strength to overcome their enemies. The fact that the enemy is asking for the same does not come under consideration.

In the months of October and November, the Goddess Durga is offered flowers, food and money. However, up until the 1940s a sacrifice in the form of goats or cattle was made. During mediaeval times she received a human sacrifice, a practice reintroduced by a terrifying dacoit leader of the 1950s, Lal Singh.

While serving as a junior member of another gang, Lal Singh prayed in the temples of Mata that he might one day have his own gang. His prayers included vows of human sacrifice. When at last he did form his own group of brigands he returned his thanks to the goddess by bursting into a temple and mercilessly slaughtering five worshippers. In time, he declared to the fleeing villagers, the sacrifice would be increased to 105 severed heads. Shocked, the government sent out swarms of police and ran Lal Singh to ground, shooting him in an encounter. In his wake he had left many suspected police informers with severed noses and mutilated faces, acts carried out in the name of the deity.

Phoolan Devi put her trust in the Goddess Durga, yet she still felt nervous that morning. But then the scouts had

returned to say that the village would be easy pickings. And there had been a good omen — the men had been forced to hide from a village woman coming towards them with a pitcher of water on her head. She had also been with child, a sign that they would all return safely from the raid. Gangs paid careful attention to such symbols and often raids were postponed because the omens were bad. An old proverb, *Baean geedee sona leedee*, says that a jackal crossing a gang's path from right to left brings gold. But another fable warns that if the jackal calls during the day or the partridge at night it is necessary to leave the district hurriedly 'or you will be seized'. If a crow caws from a tree while the river is in sight, the gang can expect a rich and successful mission; but woe betide those who continue on an expedition after seeing a crow perched on the back of a live buffalo or pig or on the bones of a dead animal.

Some legends have faded with the passage of time because the animals they tell of no longer prowl the valley. For example, cats are now rare in the ravines but formerly it was very fortuitous if one wandered into the camp at night. It was also favourable to see a wolf cross the road from right to left and to spot a large male antelope or a herd of small deer crossing from left to right. Other omens have become confused or are difficult to remember. But it is acknowledged as excellent to hear the partridge call on the left while the gang is in transit: when they are resting the omen is good only if the bird cries out from the right. One of the worst omens is the cry of the kite if heard during the night. It is not good if a lizard falls upon a gang member: his clothing has to be given away. Ill luck follows the meeting of someone who is maimed — even if the injury has previously been carried out by the gang — or coming across the path of an oil-seller, a leper or a woman carrying an empty water pitcher. And if a snake crosses either behind or in front of the gang it is necessary to kill it or give up their expedition. A dog shaking its head is bad and so is the gurgling of a large owl. The cry of a hare is also unlucky — unless some form of sacrifice is immediately offered the gang will perish in the jungles and wild animals

will drink water from their skulls. Anyone who sneezes at the outset of a raid brings bad luck and the only way to overcome it is to release kidnap victims instantly. One extraordinary omen involves turbans — if one falls off or catches fire the gang has to give up their raid plans and remain silent for seven days. Generally, the omens are simplified: a cow travelling in the same direction as the gang is good, meeting a woman with a filled pitcher on her head is favourable, while dropping a rifle or tripping up on the way is a signal that something is going to go wrong on the raid.

From their personal kitbags, Vikram's men pulled out khaki police uniforms and began to change. Vikram arranged one for Phoolan Devi. All the best-dressed gangs in the Chambal Valley possessed these, for what villager would dare fire at an approaching group dressed as police? The uniforms were prized possessions and not easy to come by — like police and army weapons they fetched a high price. Some witty tailors had managed to turn out a few uniforms but the material itself was now hard to find. Phoolan Devi's trousers were far too long — she was only a short girl, a little over five feet — so she had to remove them and do some quick alterations.

Late in the afternoon they set out across the river in four boats that had been moored at the bank and earmarked for transport. Most of the gang of fourteen carried pistols in their belts, rifles on their backs and bandoliers around their shoulders. They lost no time in running up the bank and, at Vikram's order, fired into the air: the usual signal to alert a village that a gang was calling to relieve the inhabitants of their possessions. Running into the village centre, Phoolan Devi released a number of shots then stood, rifle at waist level, with three other dacoits while Vikram supervised the pillaging. No-one resisted. At the sound of gunfire everyone had run to their homes or remained hiding on the outskirts. Occasionally, villagers fought back if they found time to muster their weapons but usually it was the dacoits with their preparedness who won the day. Gangs who expected resistance would simply shoot down a villager or two to

emphasise they meant business and this often led to the laying down of arms.

All the cash and ornaments the dacoits could find were stuffed into bags. Husbands, wives and children cowered in their homes as two or three men at a time burst in and rummaged through their belongings. Locked boxes were either smashed with a rifle butt or opened, under threat, by the owners. The raid was over in less than an hour. There had been no need for any more scare-shooting — the villagers had been most co-operative and by the time Vikram fired the single shot signifying it was time to go, the dacoits had collected weapons, food and valuables. The gang made for the riverbank, firing their weapons to tell the village they were finished. And as they rowed back across the river, one of the bandits said to Phoolan Devi, 'One of those people recognised you. He knows your family. Now, Phoolan Devi, you are truly one of us.'

The girl shrugged. Had she not been already? She wondered what her family would think when they heard she had taken part in a raid. She had heard them speak often about dacoit raids and of the terror they wrought. There had been no attacks while Phoolan Devi was growing up in Gorhapurwa, but she knew how afraid people were when dacoits were in the district. Dacoits had called at Gorhapurwa, but only for shelter or supplies. The village was not unsympathetic to *baghis*; some houses even had underground tunnels that the dacoits could use in the event of a police raid. So now her mother would hear that she, Phoolan Devi, had taken up with the bandits. Her father, she expected, would overlook the fact that she had sacrificed herself for the sake of her brother. He would talk only of the added shame she had brought to him, yet at the same time he would not be unhappy, for to have a relative linked with a gang could only add to his family's security.

Collecting their camp equipment from where it had been hidden, Vikram's dacoits headed north, walking through the night and finally setting up base in the ravines on the east bank of the Yamuna. There, the booty was shared out, but

Phoolan received nothing: only the Mauser which Vikram said she could keep as her personal possession.

They had collected three old rifles, nearly 1500 rupees, trinkets, shoes and other clothing and food. Not an outstanding haul. But not bad.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

VIKRAM MALLAH led his gang north, towards Etawah. A meeting had been arranged with Mustaqim, a dacoit leader famous for his kidnapping expertise. The 26-year-old Muslim had never forgotten his own humble beginnings and often traded arms and equipment with gangs led by low-caste men.

They found Mustaqim camped and waiting in a valley, in a small clearing surrounded by thorn bushes. When he saw Phoolan Devi he turned viciously on Vikram.

'You fool! What are you doing with this woman? Do you want to die because of her?'

Vikram held up a hand, smiling. He knew how Mustaqim felt about having women in a gang. They always caused trouble.

Phoolan Devi sat quietly on the fringe of the camp while Vikram and Mustaqim talked business. The flickering of the night fires made Mustaqim's long nose seem bigger than ever and she wanted to laugh. But she had heard of his reputation and did not want to offend him — her presence had angered him enough.

Mustaqim was wanted on several counts of murder, but his philosophy did not include killing for the sake of it. He came from the village of Gulauli, a few miles from Phoolan Devi's village, and spent his younger days as a vagabond. When he was 16 he was arrested and jailed for stealing a jeep and after his release managed to keep out of trouble until he was 23, when he and three others took part in an armed hold-up near

Auraiya. Arrested again, he confessed to the crime, but managed to skip bail and make his way to the ravines. With him ran a handful of Muslims whose lives in the villages held no promise. His daredevilry soon won him the respect of other dacoits and he became the envy of many *baghis* when he got hold of a self-loading rifle. Mustaqim worked out an effective kidnapping routine. First, he built up a dossier of the habits and financial status of his victim. He then struck, in a barrage of shots, during the evening when villagers relaxed after a meal. The gang leader's demands for his victims' release were enormous — sometimes 100,000 rupees — although he almost always accepted half the amount. Once, Mustaqim had been a member of a gang headed by the famous Malkhan Singh, still at large in the ravines. Despite his reluctance to have women in his gang, Mustaqim had formed a relationship with the sister of Man Singh, one of his gang members.

Now as they sat in the valley Man Singh struck up a conversation with Phoolan Devi. The tall dacoit, with shoulder-length hair, moustache and beard, boasted about Mustaqim's gang and told her that it possessed a sten gun, self-loading rifles and country-made pistols and that when all the members were gathered together the total strength was more than 50. Man Singh was eyeing her up and down; so was Balwan Singh Gararia, one of the Chambal Valley 'freelancers' who moved from gang to gang. He had his own woman, Meera Thakur, who had wandered away from the encampment, and he took the opportunity to make himself known to the girl who was a new face in the valley. Balwan had a large mole on the right side of his face, close to his eye. His first crime had been carried out four years earlier and, although on bail, he continued to rob. There were suspicions among some dacoits that he was an ex-army man who had changed his name.

All the men who sat around the camp were tough and fit and they all had their rankings. Some were core members, some peripheral and others fringe members, in that order. Both Mustaqim and Vikram were self-appointed leaders, as

were most other gang chiefs. Their qualifications for acceptance by the rank and file were courage, cunning and ruthlessness — and an ability to keep the gang together.

The two leaders were from lowly backgrounds: although several of the members were higher caste Thakurs who were unhappy about taking orders from them, they reluctantly accepted their authority. The core members were those who were wholeheartedly behind their leader, had joined his gang because they admired him, and made useful suggestions about the running of the group. The peripheral members were those who simply wanted to join a gang because of personal circumstances and ran with it as a means of existence — dodging police, a small-time criminal found the ravines inviting. Operating on his own for a while, he moved from crime to crime until he was absorbed by a gang. If he was resourceful, he worked his way up through the ranks until he became leader, or powerful enough to gather men under him and declare himself as leader.

After several days in the encampment, Vikram announced to his gang that he and Mustaqim had reached an agreement. Any raid requiring the power of two gangs would result in their joining forces. The future, said Vikram, looked good. He ordered his group to pack up; it was time to move on. Mustaqim had told him of several villages that were worth plundering on condition that when they next met, Vikram shared some of the booty.

They travelled north-west beyond Etawah, breaking up into pairs as they neared the town so as not to be recognised as a *baghi* gang, then coming together again at a selected riverside spot. They crossed over to the west bank and carried out raids before passing into Rajasthan. Phoolan Devi knew exactly what to do. She had been a quick learner and was proficient with the Mauser, although she had never fired at anyone. Woman or not, when she pointed it at villagers and shouted instructions they jumped to attention. She had grown extremely confident and had won the respect of the gang members — not because she was Vikram's woman but because she carried herself well on raids. It never occurred to

her whether or not she was in love with Vikram; she simply belonged to him.

He was an insanely jealous man who, if she so much as laughed with any of the men, would slap and punch her. But she accepted his cruelty because for the first time somebody really wanted her. From this brutal relationship she developed a bold personality; she learned to swear like Vikram, to fight like him, shoot as well as the best of them and have no fear of any other man except him. And he was the only person who came close to being a friend. Vikram enjoyed her raunchy sense of humour and when he laughed with her she really felt that the deity had bestowed her with good fortune.

On a raid in a village close to the Madhya Pradesh-Rajasthan border she officially became an accessory to murder when Vikram ordered a man killed. The villager had run from a house and the leader had shouted to a dacoit to bring him down. Moments later, the man was on the ground, shattered and bloody. He had been shot in the back. He groaned for fifteen minutes, then lay still. Seeing him die like that meant nothing to the girl who had endured so much violence herself.

Weeks later, when they attacked another village in Rajasthan, there were problems. Phoolan Devi asked herself afterwards whether there had been any bad omens, but could not recall any. While the raid was in progress and Vikram stood close to her overseeing the pillage, a shot rang out and a bullet ripped through his right thigh. He dropped sideways, clutching his leg. Immediately, another shot was heard as the villager who had hit Vikram was killed by one of the *baghis*. Phoolan tied a tourniquet above the wound, then two of the dacoits lifted Vikram up and dragged him away.

Despite his agony and the difficulty of the terrain, they covered ten miles before feeling safe from any police pursuit. One of the men examined Vikram's leg. The bullet had gone straight through the upper part of the thigh. It had torn muscle, but had missed vital arteries. However, it would be several weeks before Vikram would be able to walk properly.

For a week he lay in great pain and Phoolan tended his needs. When at last he was fit, they returned to Madhya Pradesh where Lalaram and Sriram Singh, released from jail, were waiting to rejoin the gang. Whatever the cost, the Singh brothers were determined to re-establish their authority. It was such a burning issue that the prospect of a respectable life did not enter their minds. They had no intention of following the example set by several big-name dacoits who had been able to cast off resentments and take up 'straight' living on leaving prison.

One of the strangest twists in the life of a former dacoit came with the release from jail of Madho Singh, who once had a reward of 150,000 rupees on his head — he became a magician. In the Gwalior daily papers an advertisement appeared:

> Good news. There is no need to wait any longer. Yesterday's dacoit has become today's Great Magician, Madho Singh ... Yes sir, the same Madho Singh on whose head there was a reward of 150,000 rupees. Yes, these days he is acting as the hero of three films; he is a person about whom authors have written books.

On reading the advertisement, which was grossly exaggerated (Madho was the subject of some magazine articles), a neighbour of his expressed the hope that not all dacoits would become magicians, for then the police would have an even more difficult time finding them.

Another notorious dacoit, Mohar Singh, whose capture would have brought 300,000 rupees had he not surrendered, took up farming and politics on his release from jail. He promised his allegiance to Mrs Gandhi's Congress Party and aspired to becoming a politician himself. He said 'I think ex-dacoits have a very good chance of doing well in politics. After all, they have a very heroic image. I will definitely take to politics seriously.'

For the Singh brothers, though, it was back to the ravines, calling first at Behmai, where they had friends, to meet

Vikram Mallah. A feast was prepared when Vikram arrived to celebrate the brothers' release and their anticipated reunion with their fellow dacoits. As they sat in a large room the brothers stole glances at Phoolan: so this was the ugly whore. Her reputation as a cock-teaser suited her hag's face, they agreed. That she and Vikram Mallah should have the respect of the gang which they believed should have come back under their control if Babu Gujar ever died was too great an insult to bear. It would all change, when the time was right.

There was much dancing and merrymaking in the village that day, although Vikram, with his leg bound in cloth, had to sit it out. Only the slightest excuse was needed for villagers to hold a celebration, no matter how meagre the feast. Phoolan Devi took part in some of the village games with the young people. They played tag and hide and seek; then someone suggested *kabaddi*. Nearly two dozen young people formed two lines, facing one another, and then grasped their opposite number's arms and started tugging. It was a popular village game. When everybody was pulled to either one side or the other across an imaginary line, you totted up the number of victors and vanquished. Phoolan Devi's opponent was a young Thakur who had teased her throughout the afternoon by pinching her arms and her behind and being just a little more rough than necessary during the game of hide and seek. Now he was gripping her wrists tightly and digging his nails into her skin so that her eyes watered. She struggled to pull him across to her side, but he was far too strong and with one final violent heave jerked her across and threw her heavily to the ground. Gasping for breath, she heard the young man leading the others in a chorus of laughter. As she stood and dusted herself down he said to the others, 'That will teach her to tackle me, the silly girl.'

She clenched her teeth and her fingers curled into her palm. Laugh, she thought; laugh as much as you like because I will take my revenge one day.

The people of the region believe strongly in 'an eye for an eye' and will not rest until wrongs have been redressed. It is traditional for wives and mothers to urge husbands and sons

to avenge a misdeed. Hurt pride and vanity are often the motivating factors and when a life is involved the women will not rest until those responsible have also been killed. In one instance, a village boy, Sher Singh, grew up not knowing his father who had been sentenced to fourteen years in jail after being implicated in a dacoity case. The man died without ever being released. As Sher Singh stood with his mother at the cremation, she urged him to kill all his father's enemies. He began by chopping off the nose of one and then, running to the ravines with his brother, began a systematic elimination of all those who had been against his family. Murder in the name of revenge is part of the game of dacoity.

It was now June 1980. Eleven months had passed since Phoolan Devi had been taken from her village. All that time she had cooked for and slept with Vikram and had not deserted his bed. Her new-found security had changed her from a brash teenager to an earthy young woman. She had begun to flaunt her naked charms in front of the men. She enjoyed seeing the desire in their eyes as she flirted with them or changed her clothes in their midst. Phoolan Devi was beginning to feel power. Not only could she use a gun proficiently; the sexual hold she had on Vikram gave her a feeling of equality with the gang leader. There was no doubt his attentions were as strong as they had ever been. He shared his thoughts with her, she shared hers with him.

But on that afternoon in Behmai, when she was thrown to the ground, she said nothing. She had been made to look a fool in front of everybody. From the village children she asked only one thing: the name of the young man who had floored her. It was Surendra Singh. She would never forget it.

The gang moved off, Sriram and Lalaram Singh (no relation to the young man) in their company. The monsoon rain swept through the valley and the black alluvial soil of the Yamuna ravines was treacherously slippery. Instead of committing dacoities they spent days sheltering, since the flooded rivers and drenched gullies made movement sluggish. They were entirely reliant on their village sympathisers for

food. Vikram was still establishing his position in the ravines, and he paid well for supplies.

Sriram, the elder of the Singh brothers, felt a mixture of hate and lust for Phoolan Devi. It had been years since he had taken a woman and he had heard the talk that she was good at the job. Two of the gang claimed they had made it with her, unknown to Vikram. She was easy, they said. You just had to flatter her. Sriram told his brother that he was going to have her one day. His brother grinned: only after he had taken her! And what would they do then? Why, they would kill the bitch! This talk excited them and Sriram felt that it would not be long before he imposed total humiliation on this small, arrogant woman and then wiped her off the face of the earth. What an achievement it would be to have her behind Vikram's back; to take her, the Sudra chief's woman, with her consent. Then they could tell him what they had done, what she had agreed to, before putting him to death. It would be the ultimate insult and he would be dead before he could even contemplate revenge.

As the gang moved along the riverbank Sriram, who was not much taller than Phoolan Devi, tried to find out how she responded to flattery. He had been impressed, he told her, by the way she had fired her gun while practising shooting at a target on a tree. She shrugged and walked on. So, thought Sriram, she is not susceptible to flattery. Well, he would come out with it straight. After they had walked for another hour, Sriram started the conversation again. Vikram was ahead and out of earshot.

'Phoolan Devi, are you going to stay as the paramour of Vikram Mallah for ever?'

She glanced at him. 'Why do you ask that?'

'Because there are some in the gang who believe you have the qualities of a leader. One day you will have your own gang.'

She sneered and made no reply.

'Perhaps you and I could operate as leaders.'

'Why would I wish that?'

'Because it would be a great honour to serve beside you. You are a true *baghi*. And if I could choose a woman in these

valleys to walk with me, it would be you, Phoolan Devi.'

She looked at him with contempt. She knew how the men had watched her but none had dared make such suggestions. She understood what he was saying.

'I have no need of a Thakur dog when my man is chief,' she said scornfully, and walked on.

Later, when they were eating, Phoolan Devi told Vikram that she thought Sriram wanted to make love to her. He jumped to his feet, knocking over pans, and strode to the canvas shelter where Sriram was resting. He dragged him to his feet and pushed the end of his rifle under his chin.

'Do not play with my woman, Sriram Singh!' he shouted, and threw him to the ground. The hatred that existed between them was now in the open.

Whenever the rain eased the gang commited a dacoity, as did the affiliated group headed by Mustaqim. From time to time they joined up for a mass raid. Their activities began to cause concern in the Uttar Pradesh Parliament and at the police headquarters, and pressure was put on the police to eliminate them.

The police department in each state has an Inspector-General as its head and the lowest-serving officer is a constable. States are divided into a number of ranges, headed by a Deputy Inspector-General, and each range is broken down again into several administrative districts known as circles. Within these circles are the police stations. While each circle has men set aside for routine duties, there are also officers in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, specially trained to tackle dacoits. In Madhya Pradesh they are known as the SAF (Special Armed Force), in Uttar Pradesh the PAC (Police Armed Constabulary) and in Rajasthan the RAC (Rajasthan Armed Constabulary). Each of these groups of commando-trained men also comes under the charge of a Deputy Inspector-General.

In 1953 a Joint Command was set up to fight the dacoit problem that straddled state frontiers, its headquarters in the city of Agra, famous for the Taj Mahal. But it was doomed almost from the start because it ran into co-ordination

problems and was troubled by interstate rivalry between senior officers.

Bickering also occurs among the men of individual state police forces, usually involving high-ranking officials and officers of the middle rank. Everyone is out to earn praise for gallantry, but it is the middle-rank men who have to face the danger while, they complain, their superiors sit behind desks and wait to earn the laurels. However, like the petty feuding of old, it is the interstate rivalry which is the main problem. Claims and counter-claims are made even today by the Madhya Pradesh government authorities and the Uttar Pradesh police that it was they, not their rivals across the frontier, who were responsible for the killing in 1955 of one of the most famous dacoits of all time, Man Singh. His gang was responsible for some 185 murders and more than 1100 robberies. It had also been involved in more than 90 shoot-outs with the police, which had resulted in the deaths of 32 officers.

In 1948 the Agra police in Uttar Pradesh formed guerilla parties to hunt for Man Singh, and when at last police and dacoits came face to face four gang members were shot down. Making his escape, Man Singh avenged their deaths by attacking villages and massacring those suspected of passing on information about the gang movements to the police. In the state governments his activities became the subject of heated debate, and substantial rewards were offered for his capture, dead or alive. Finally Man Singh's youngest son was run to ground near Etawah in 1954, and was wounded and arrested. Man Singh retaliated by killing eleven villagers and twelve policemen, and later fourteen potential witnesses against his son were also murdered. Police were ordered to remain in the ravines until Man Singh's reign of terror was brought to an end. In August 1955 the dacoit leader was resting under a tree in Bhind with his gang when police surrounded them. A fierce gun battle broke out. Man Singh's right-hand man, Rupa, escaped, but the chief was shot down. As members of the Joint Command were involved, police from Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh took the credit for

the elimination of Man Singh. Politicians backed their own police and the bickering turned into such a fierce arugument that the Joint Command was disbanded and law and order deteriorated.

Again the politicians cried out that something had to be done about the dacoit problem and fierce anti-bandit operations were launched in all states. In Madhya Pradesh — known as Madhya Bharat in those days — areas were divided up according to the movements of various dacoit gangs and armed police were stationed in them. New police stations and outposts were opened, supplied with radio to co-ordinate the movements of men out in the field who were equipped with walkie-talkies. In Gwalior, the operational commander had a radio fitted to his vehicle for the first time and extra jeeps were provided for patrolling the bandit areas. These, however, were found impractical in dacoit territory; routes to villages were little more than tracks and it was impossible to get a jeep into the ravines.

Nevertheless, the anti-dacoity campaign was continued with the setting up of a fund to pass on to informers, and police forces were strengthened with new recruits. As a result of this campaign, 1110 dacoits were killed between 1956 and 1971. On paper, the figures looked impressive but civil administration had, in fact, taken a backward step, for the breaking up of gangs simply resulted in individual members who escaped arrest or death forming their own groups. They found new members among villagers who, fearing the police purge would uncover their relatively minor crimes, had taken to the ravines.

The armed forces expect to be engaged in some form of shooting when they set out on expeditions, either firing warning shots or being involved in a shoot-out. Officially, bandits in each state must be challenged to surrender but, in Uttar Pradesh particularly, this is regarded as a waste of time. The PACs have earned themselves a fearsome reputation. From all around the state stories of their jackbooted standover tactics and brutality have poured in since their

formation. After one incident in Meerut, when the PAC climbed onto the roof of a Muslim building and showered bullets onto anyone they spotted, including women and children, one resident commented, 'They are butchers. Only when the PAC is withdrawn will we think that the government is interested in our safety.'

*Baghis* with a price on their heads prefer to take their chances in a shoot-out rather than surrender and be shot down in cold blood by the PAC or face the hangman's noose. The PAC is aware of this attitude and tries to fire the first bullets. On both sides of the border, the authorities know that their numbers are totally inadequate for dealing with the dacoit problem and rather than lose a gang which is on the run they consider it necessary to shoot them down.

In an encounter, gangs pull several tricks to confuse police, among them the old but effective practice of draping clothing on a bush or holding up some item of clothing on the end of a stick from behind a hillock. The resulting gunfire identifies police positions. Knowing the territory, the dacoits have the upper hand, unless completely surrounded; the only blessing those tortuous ravines offer the police is the soft earth where bullets become embedded.

The authorities are loath to engage in gun battles in rocky territory, where richocheting bullets and stone splinters threaten serious injury. In the villages, police are aware that they have the inhabitants to contend with. Residents who have traditionally been subjected to police harassment, apathy, graft and corruption often consider the police to be worse than the dacoits who come to their villages to rob them.

The tendency among officers to shoot first and ask questions afterwards has been enhanced by the light sentences sometimes handed out to dacoits who have been pulled in at the risk of police lives. A high-ranking Uttar Pradesh police officer, commenting on the ruthless brutality of dacoits, observed that some judges, aware of the terror imposed by the gangs, handed out severe sentences to suit the crime and act as a deterrent. 'But there are others on the bench nowadays,' he said, 'who have not this experience and

look upon these offences with a sympathy which possibly a Robin Hood would inspire and deserve, but to which the dacoits of these provinces can lay no claims, and award sentences much as if awarding compensation in a civil suit.'

One of the greatest grudges has emerged from the 'letting off' of dacoits on legal technicalities and the granting of bail, which allows many bandits to run off to the ravines and take up where they left off. Witnesses who can give incriminating evidence sometimes disappear during a court case because they have not been guaranteed any protection by the courts. Villagers recall the story of one man who was dragged in by the police to give evidence before a court against a gang run by Har Bilash. Although the court was aware that many of the gang were still on the loose, the villager was offered no protection and when he returned home the dacoits were waiting for him. He had talked for the last time. The same fate befell seven villagers who were forced by police to appear in a murder case against members of a gang headed by Nahar Singh. They were guaranteed full police protection, but on leaving the court they had to make their way back to their village unescorted. On arrival, they were all shot dead by Nahar Singh. Senior police, while officially regarding the harassment of witnesses as deplorable, say privately that it is one of the unfortunate facts of life. Sometimes the innocent must suffer if the dacoit problem is to be put down once and for all.

Any gang leader who wants to stay alive makes it his business to be aware of police tactics. Vikram Mallah was no exception. He knew they could run into a police ambush anywhere in the valley at any time and he used a special strategy to counter this. After a raid, he took his gang speedily as far as possible from the hamlet they had looted. Then he would alter the pattern and proceed very slowly, sending scouts on ahead. It was an advantage to distance themselves from the scene of a crime, but there was always the danger of running into a police ambush set up for another gang operating in the area to which they had fled.

Now, though, as he took his gang east towards the River

Ganges he was not quite so cautious, for the rain still fell in torrents and police patrols were unlikely. He had not quite recovered from his wound and being always wet and on the move had made him feverish. But there was no relaxing. He did not trust the Singh brothers, who were still with them. When he met up with Mustaqim, who he believed was also on the left bank of the Ganges, he would discuss what he should do. But the small rivers that fed the Ganges were in flood — the gang realised that the big river would have overflowed too and Mustiqim would not be there. So back they went towards the Yamuna. It was never comfortable during the monsoon. No sooner had the rain stopped than bursts of sunshine turned the ravines into a steam bath. Until they found villagers to supply them with dry clothing, they had to march on in their wet things. Vikram poured sweat and moved very slowly. He needed rest, so they headed for his uncle's village, Baijamau, near the Yamuna. The Singh brothers watched his condition and knew that the time to be rid of him was near.

On arrival at the village, the dacoit chief's relative, Barelal, set them up with food and accommodation. The gang were placed in houses around the hamlet, while Vikram and Phoolan were given a room in Barelal's home.

'I am sick,' he told his uncle. 'I need to stop for a time.'

He slept for nearly three days. A doctor was brought from another village to examine him and declared that with rest he would be well soon. One sunny morning Vikram asked Phoolan to walk down to the river with him.

'We can eat this,' she said, holding up a water melon which one of the village women had given to her.

They sauntered from the village, past the house where the Singh brothers were staying. The brothers were sitting on a doorstep, but went inside when Phoolan Devi and Vikram approached. She looked at them with contempt: as far as she was concerned, they were nothing. At the river's edge they found a grassy spot and she threw down a garment for them to sit on.

'The monsoon is almost over,' said Vikram. 'We must meet Mustaqim soon and talk.'

They had not been there long and Phoolan Devi was cutting into the melon when Vikram screamed. A split second later she heard the delayed crack of a rifle shot. Blood was gushing from his leg, the same leg that had already been hit, and Vikram had fainted. The girl pulled off his trouser cord and tied a tourniquet above the wound. Then she became aware of the danger and glanced about her, but there was no sign of the gunman. Instinctively she knew it had to be one of the Singh brothers, probably Sriram. She had to hurry. Laying Vikram in a comfortable position, she raced back to the village. No-one had set out for the riverbank; a single gunshot rarely alerted anyone when a gang was hiding in a village. Weapons were fired from time to time in target practice or to test the accuracy of the sights.

'Vikram Mallah has been shot!' she shouted. Men ran from their work and followed her to the wounded man while others set off for the doctor.

The bullet was still lodged in the leg. It had splintered the femur. Vikram lay unconscious in Barelal's house as the doctor cut open the wound and pulled out the piece of lead with a pair of tweezers. He had lost a lot of blood but, said the doctor, he would not die.

The Singh brothers had vanished. Some of Vikram's men searched the nearby ravines for them, but they had too good a lead. It was dangerous to pursue them far; most of the villages in the district were Thakur-dominated and if it became known that Mallahs were out to get members of a higher caste, all hell would break loose.

In the morning one of the gang members, Ram Avtar, informed Phoolan they were going to split up until Vikram improved. It was dangerous to stay in one place too long and they could not operate without a leader. If Vikram died, they would elect someone else, but for the time being they were prepared to wait. None of the dacoits, he said, would be far away and a few intended to stay in the village.

Lalaram and Sriram Singh had fled to the village of Damanpur, where they stayed occasionally. As far as they were concerned, Vikram was dead. It had been a good shot;

the Mallah had keeled over. And they had heard the shouts in the village, cries that he had been shot.

Word spread through the ravines. Vikram Mallah was dead. The Singh brothers made no admissions. But villagers, and eventually the police, linked them to the shooting. In the Kanpur police district, senior officers thankfully rubbed their hands. One of their biggest troublemakers had been eliminated. The circumstances would have to be investigated, of course, but his death would go a long way towards destroying the confidence other gang leaders had in their own men.

A group of investigating officers made their way to Baijamau and asked to see the body of Vikram Mallah. Alas, explained Barelal, along with Vikram's father and brother, it had been put into the Yamuna River. The police took statements from the father and brother to that effect and left the village, unaware that Vikram was very much alive, conscious, and eager for the story to spread that he was dead. It would give him time to recover and he would be able to mastermind dacoities for some time before the authorities realised he was again active.

So convincing was the story that when three members of Vikram's gang, who had made the mistake of going to Etawah in the expectation that they would not be recognised, were arrested, police became certain he was dead. If the leader was not dead, why had the gang broken up? The arrested men confirmed their suspicions.

Meanwhile, the wounded bandit chief was taken on horseback to Jalaun for further treatment and then, to cover his tracks, travelled on to the village of Unnao. He made a remarkable recovery. Within weeks he was heading back to Baijamau, but despite attempts to hide his identity some villagers recognised him. Word that he was alive spread as rapidly as the news that he had been killed. The police were perturbed. They were going to look foolish, unless the situation could be remedied. But how to find Vikram Mallah? There were scores of villages he could take refuge in, hundreds of houses, thousands of rooms.

To track him down, they needed the mind of a dacoit, and one who knew how Vikram would move about. The three arrested gang members were questioned, but they could only guess at the places where he would shelter. Their information could not be trusted, anyway. For the police to go out searching would be futile — Vikram's lines of communication, the informers he had bought up, would keep him one step ahead. What the authorities wanted, it was decided, was a single assassin; someone who was prepared to act alone and who would not be afraid to kill the bandit leader. Senior police agreed there was only one person for the job: Sriram Singh.

Early in August, Sriram and his brother met a senior police officer at a secret location. A deal was reached. Vikram Mallah would be killed — there were to be no mistakes — and the brothers would not be harassed by the police, providing they did not commit any crimes in the Kanpur district. If Vikram was carrying any weapons, they were to be retrieved and handed in to the authorities. That was the extent of it; kill Vikram and run free. And the complicity would be denied by both sides.

Vikram was feeling a great deal better than in those feverish days before he was shot. But he still found it necessary to sleep a great deal. Phoolan Devi cooked for him and gave him personal attention, for apart from two or three other gang members of the same caste who were still waiting around, she was the only person he could rely on away from Baijamau village. His uncle, who was putting him up again, was delighted with his progress and told him that as soon as he was fit to walk he would accompany him to the river to take the air. A few days later Barelal, Phoolan Devi and Vikram set out from the house. They followed a track down to the bank and found a place under a *babul* tree. It was a cloudy day, but the sun broke through at intervals and the shade from the branches was welcome. They talked for a while and then Vikram began to feel drowsy. His uncle also settled down to sleep and Phoolan Devi, bored, wandered off along the river, a dirty brown from the rains. The girl sat down a short

distance off and idly tossed sticks into the water, watching them drift away. Across the river stretched the mounds and hillocks of the ravines showing occasional patches of green. All around her the gravelly clay was almost black. She wondered how her family were. It had been more than a year since she had seen them. She could picture her father, grumbling about the damage the rains had caused. Phoolan Devi began to sing.

A shot! Two shots! They seemed to come from along the river, from around the bend where the men had been sleeping. She ran up the bank and hid, fearing a police party had found them. It was 20 minutes before she dared move. Afraid to call, she darted out and slid behind the next mound. How stupid she had been. She had left her Mauser under the tree with Vikram and his uncle. She was just starting to run to the next hill when a man jumped in front of her: Lalaram Singh, bent slightly forward, arms spread, daring her to run past him. She spun round. His brother was immediately behind her, grinning. She saw that in addition to his own gun he carried her rifle and Vikram's. She was terrified they were going to kill her and screamed, 'Vikram Mallah! Vikram Mallah!'

Lalaram stepped up and punched her in the face, sending her sprawling. Then they dragged her up and pulled her to a boat and flung her in. The craft bobbed along the river as the Singh brothers took an oar each. Suddenly she vomited and as she made to lift her head she was kicked in the face. For the rest of the trip, the girl cowered in the bottom, weeping her heart out. Vikram, she realised, was dead.

At last the boat scraped onto a riverbank and Phoolan looked up. She recognised the houses. Behmai. The village where she had been so humiliated in the game of *kabaddi*. A group of people stood along the track leading up to the hamlet. They chattered excitedly among themselves but made no move as the Singhs pushed her towards the village. She was taken to a house and locked in a room. Outside, a crowd had gathered. Their talk was loud and she heard her name mentioned. She stood in complete darkness — her

prison had no slits to let the light in, no gaps in the roof for ventilation. Phoolan Devi was convinced this was her last day on earth. No more would she run with Vikram; the gang, when they heard he was dead, would split up and spread out through the valley. It was the end. As her eyes became accustomed to the blackness she saw a bed against a wall and a plastic bucket beside it. There was a pitcher of water, too. It was as if the room had been specially prepared for her. She did not expect the door to be unlocked, but tried it anyway — in vain. She threw herself on the bed and sobbed, hoping they would kill her quickly. But she knew what they would do to her first. Not long afterwards, someone began fumbling with the lock; then the door was flung open and a figure stepped through.

He knew where to find her. Slamming the door shut, he went straight to her and as she made to get up, pushed her down violently and ripped off her clothes.

Memories of the past swept through her. She could no longer remember the number of times men had abused her. Vikram had promised her it would never happen again and she, his woman, had believed him. But Vikram was no more.

She punched and scratched but the man hit back so hard that she thought her head had split open. And then he was on her and she could only cry and groan in misery. When it was over he left without a word and the room was filled with the stench of fear and sweat and the sounds of her moaning. Immediately, another man was there, taking her, cursing her, biting, abusing. There were three others after him. She had stopped fighting. Completely numbed, she let them do what they would.

In the morning a bowl of porridge was pushed through the door, but she was in no mood to eat. She drank a little water from the pitcher and used what was left to wash herself. But the rape began again.

A man laughed. It was Sriram Singh. 'Why,' she cried, 'do you do *mazak* (fool around) with me?'

He spat in her mouth and bit her breasts until she screamed. She prayed, she begged Maa Bhagwati (Goddess Durga) for

release from this torture, even if it be death. Her body ached and she knew her face must be swollen and bruised. She lost all sense of time. She tried to eat a little, although sometimes she vomited.

At some point during those lost days, Lalaram ordered her to get up. She rose unsteadily, dressed in her shredded clothing, and stepped out into the harsh sunlight. Pain stabbed at her swollen eyes and she put up an arm to cover them. The Singh brothers were sitting outside the house and a crowd had gathered to stare at her. Even the children stood open-mouthed; but there were no women. Despite the difference in their castes, they knew what she had endured and, as women, they sympathised. Just who had raped Phoolan Devi remained a secret among the men, and each wife could only hope her husband had not been involved. It was common knowledge that dacoit gangs sometimes kidnapped young women from the villages to satiate their sexual appetites, but the only dacoits in the village at that time were the Singh brothers, and the Mallah girl had been visited by many men. The abuse of a low-caste woman was of no concern to the Thakur men. Had she been one of their own the traditional moral code would have decreed that the rape be avenged with the blood of the wrong-doer.

Lalaram rose and walked up to Phoolan Devi. He dropped a metal bucket at her feet.

'Now, Phoolan Devi, you will fetch water for me.'

She stared at him through her puffed-up eyes. Had she not been humiliated enough? She was a dacoit; she could fire a gun. She was not a servant, especially not a servant of a Thakur. She spat in his face. Lalaram's response was to punch her again and then she was pushed back into her dark, stifling prison. The violation continued until she could bear it no longer and she cried out, 'Yes, yes, I will fetch his water!'

Outside the house once more, Sriram ripped the clothes from her, so that she stood naked before the watchers.

'Do not be ashamed, Phoolan Devi,' he said. 'I know how you love to wriggle your little ass around.'

She was given two buckets and then sent off through the

centre of the village to the well. Scores stood by watching as she started to draw water from the well, dwarfed by the concrete pillars which supported the axle. If any man felt sympathy for her he dared not show it, for he knew that the Singh brothers had short tempers and had killed many times. If public humiliation was their way of punishing this woman, then that was how it had to be. Such was the general feeling in the village as the teenager walked back with the buckets, spilling water as she went.

'You have lost a lot of water, Phoolan Devi,' said Lalaram. 'You must go back and get more.' And with that he booted over the buckets. She collapsed at his feet. She was too weak to do it again; too hot, too tired. He kicked her over onto her side.

'I will be good to you, Phoolan Devi,' Lalaram said mockingly. 'I will allow you to rest now. You will work tonight. You will draw water right through the night.'

The well was close to the house of the village *sarpanch*, Taqdir Ramgulam Singh, and she hoped that help would come from that quarter. But it was not to be. When the sun came up Sriram Singh pushed her back into the room and raped her again.

Had it been a week? Ten days? Twenty? She did not know. But she had been counting the assaults: 24. The same men had come back two or three times, perhaps more. The Singh brothers were not solely responsible.

It was dark, in the early hours, when she got up and tried the door, as she had tried it so many times before. It creaked open. Her last visitor had forgotten to lock it. Without hesitation she slipped around the side of the house and ran straight to the ravines. She followed the banks of the river downstream, knowing that her own village lay that way, across the Yamuna.

There was nowhere else for her to go.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

THE DEATH of Vikram Mallah was a great victory for the Uttar Pradesh police. They announced that they had eliminated the bandit in a fierce encounter; officers had risked their lives to put an end to his reign of terror. It was another attempt at one-upmanship over their colleagues across the border.

For the scattered members of his gang, whatever the truth behind his death, it meant hurried reorganisation. Ram Avtar, a Mallah, rallied some of them together and declared himself leader. But he agreed they should confer with Mustaqim and his former lieutenant, Man Singh, who had recently split from Mustaqim to form a small gang of his own, though retaining some affiliation with his former leader.

Phoolan Devi burned with hatred and thoughts of revenge. At her family's house they had found her restless and bad-tempered and she had been anxious to leave after only a short time, worried that someone would pass on her whereabouts to the police. Her liaison with dacoits had taught her to trust no-one and to keep her eyes and ears open. As soon as she was well, she bade her family farewell and set off across the river to track down Mustaqim. She found out that he was to hold a meeting with the most sought-after dacoit of them all, Malkhan Singh, to discuss the murder of Vikram and the state of the gangs. Tall and handsome, with a bristling moustache, sparkling eyes and a reward of 70,000 rupees on his head, Malkhan was regarded as the emperor of all dacoits, to whom the *baghis* turned for advice and to settle

inter-gang disputes. Vikram's murder by one of his own men had sent ripples of distaste through the Chambal.

During her rest at Gorhapurwa, Phoolan Devi ignored the village gossip — everyone knew she had been running with the dacoits and they had heard all about the rape — and nurtured ideas about joining Mustaqim's gang. She realised the unenviable position she was in. She was a low-caste woman with no power to demand a position in a gang as prestigious as his. But she would try. At least she would be able to link up with Ram Avtar, who knew of her ability with a gun.

Reaching the meeting-place, she was stopped by one of Malkhan Singh's guards, then followed him to the *baghis*' camp in a clearing. Nearly 50 bandits were present, and Phoolan Devi had unwittingly timed her arrival well. After an exchange of civilities, the men formed a large circle to begin the debate. Ram Avtar jumped to his feet and told the group there was little doubt that the Thakur brothers, Lalaram and Sriram Singh, had shot Vikram. They should be hunted down and killed for their act of treachery. Malkhan Singh, who believed strongly in the 'eye for an eye' principle, agreed that the brothers should be punished but he warned that they would be expecting trouble and would be well prepared. Phoolan Devi, sitting at the back of the circle, leaped up, startling them all with her shrill outburst.

'I want revenge!' she shouted. 'They have murdered Vikram and they have made *mazak* with me. If no-one will join me, I will find them and kill them myself!'

'You, a woman, will kill Lalaram and Sriram Singh?' asked the huge, bearded Ghanshyam, one of Malkhan's former lieutenants who now had a gang of his own.

Laughter rippled through the group, making Phoolan Devi more furious.

'Laugh. But I will have my revenge!'

The meeting concluded that Mustaqim be considered the combined chief of gangs led by Ram Avtar, Balwan Singh and Man Singh. They would operate individually, but for a big dacoity they would regroup under Mustaqim's authority.

When the gathering broke up, Man Singh approached Phoolan Devi and told her that to try to go it alone would be foolish. Lone *baghis* did not last long. They could never get enough money to pay informers and if they fell sick there was no-one who could bring them food.

Accepting his advice, she went to Mustaqim and asked if she could join his gang. The leader shook his head.

'There can be no women in my operation, Phoolan Devi. I have nothing personally against you, but a woman causes trouble. Vikram has lost his life because of you, despite my warnings to him.'

She flushed with anger. 'He had enemies because of his caste, not because of me!'

'I am filled with regret. I will work in association with you, perhaps, but I will never work with you.'

She turned and walked quickly away and sat sulkily by a fire. So Mustaqim did not think she was up to it? Well, she would prove her worth, not only to him but to the whole valley. As if he had read her thoughts, Man Singh came and sat beside her, prodding the fire with a stick.

'You are welcome to come with me, Phoolan Devi. I will give you a gun, the same as you had before. And I will treat you as an equal. You are a strong woman, stronger than many men. I hear you are a good shot, too.'

His eyes, jet black, dared her to accept his offer. To be his woman, and on equal terms, not as a lowly gang 'kept', would not be a bad thing. His mistress and his equal, he had said, and she could see that he had meant it. Her surliness changed to a delighted grin.

Man Singh used to sell milk in his village in the Jhansi district of Uttar Pradesh, but constant quarrels with relatives and neighbours had driven him to the ravines. Then he heard that his two brothers had been arrested and that one had died in the hands of the police. He was later accused of murdering a police inspector, although Man Singh said the crime had been committed by his former boss, Mustaqim.

Malkhan Singh summoned his gang and took his leave. It was a signal for the others to disperse. Only Man Singh's

handful of men, the gang headed by Ram Avtar, and Mustaqim's group remained; and to celebrate their new co-operative, Mustaqim voted they pull off a kidnapping. He had in mind a well-off Bodur family who would pay a great deal to get one of their relatives home again safe and well. Travelling in small groups, the joint gangs headed downriver towards Bodur, in the Hamirpur district. Perhaps Mustaqim had decided to test Phoolan Devi's bravery, for he ordered her to accompany the three men who were to carry out the deed. It was her first real taste of power and it thrilled her. With a gun in her hand, she was invincible. You pointed a gun at these people and they would do anything. They held the frightened man for a week before the ransom, 25,000 rupees, was paid. After several more dacoities, Mustaqim said, 'I am impressed, Phoolan Devi.' Then, with a grin, 'But you cannot come with me into my gang. What would my little girl say?'

Anger flashed through her at his presumption that she would sleep with him. 'And what would my man say?' she snapped. 'I tell you, I am not a plaything any more!'

In the first week with Man Singh she had become strongly attached to him. He was like a brother, laughing, teasing her and occasionally engaging her in a friendly wrestling match. Phoolan Devi liked this new experience. When she had asked him not to touch her because she still suffered from having been raped at Behmai, he respected her wishes, although he did lie with her. But she could not forget her duty to avenge Vikram's death — after all, it had been he who had given her a status. She was determined that her fondness for Man Singh should not interfere with her intention to destroy Sriram and Lalaram Singh. That had to remain a priority. In the meantime, she joined Man Singh on robberies, and waited.

The gang concentrated on straight hold-ups, robbing villages and stopping vehicles that passed along lonely roads on the fringe of the ravines at night. Always, they wore police uniforms, a particular advantage when stopping vehicles. Drivers were well aware that in these districts to keep on going when challenged by a genuine police road-block

resulted in a hail of bullets; and sometimes drivers were relieved to find they had been stopped by dacoits who simply wanted to take their possessions and run. Bona fide police had a reputation for pushing people around and threatening them with arrest before they relieved a driver of his 'donation'. Not us, the police would say later; must have been a gang of dacoits dressed like policemen.

Phoolan Devi began to develop a taste for the excitement and danger that was part of every dacoity. Almost daily now she and her gang would steal money or valuables from somebody. Her defilement at Behmai had changed her into a woman who showed little mercy, particularly if there was any hint of insubordination from villagers who could not take a short, teenage woman dacoit seriously. One man who answered her back received a bullet in the foot. She reckoned that a wounded, frightened man would talk more loudly of the power of Phoolan Devi.

There had, however, been little opposition. Certainly there had been no problems with police patrols. She and Man Singh made it their business to be well away from the scene of a dacoity by the time the authorities reached it. But no dacoit gang can travel for long through the ravines without encountering the police. In late January 1981, near Ajitmal, in the Jhansi district south of Gwalior, they were suddenly confronted by a police patrol as they rounded a hill near a small river, who were as surprised as they were. Both groups jumped for cover. Phoolan Devi's gang were all in police uniforms. They could not be sure whether the others were dacoits or police. Then the tinny voice of a megaphone asked them to identify themselves. There was no doubt now that they had run into an official patrol. Phoolan Devi, who had thrown herself beside Man Singh, whispered, 'Are we going to be captured? Have we got a chance?'

Man Singh glanced at the other gang members. 'How many are we? Ten, twelve? We have to run.'

Suddenly, there was a burst of gunfire from along the path. The dacoits' silence had told the anti-dacoit squad all they needed to know.

It is the practice of all dacoit gangs to get away from police patrols as quickly as possible, for a lengthy encounter gives the authorities time to call in reinforcements and work out tactics. Usually they fire at police positions to keep them pinned down, then run, firing wildly.

Man Singh's men let off a number of shots, then one, Attu, stood and turned — and caught a bullet in the upper arm. Quickly, his fellows went to his aid and started to lead him away. Firing their own weapons, Man Singh and Phoolan Devi backed away from their crude shelter.

When at last the police patrol crept up to the spot they found only a small book — Attu's diary. It was sent back to police headquarters in Lucknow where it made interesting reading. In it was a list of dacoits they were after. Not only that, it revealed the structure of the major gangs and the linking up of the groups led by Ram Avtar, Man Singh and Balwan Singh under the overall leadership of Mustaqim. And there was a new name: Phoolan Devi. Although she was known to local police, she had not made it into the 'most wanted' files at headquarters.

The diary did the rounds of senior policemen. Attu had been most helpful. He had meticulously listed all cash transactions conducted by the various gang leaders and the number of cartridges they possessed, describing whether they were 'long graft' or 'short graft'. The amount of money stolen in a dacoity on November 11 was listed, and Attu noted that an informer for that job had been paid 2,000 rupees. The opening page of the diary told a typical story. Attu had originally written his address as Rampura in the Jalaun district. This was now crossed out and replaced with the words 'Chambal Ravines'. Attu listed shopping expeditions in which he had bought shoes, socks, a bag, soap, food and a watch. He had also purchased an enormous number of cashew nuts, but there was no indication that these were for Phoolan Devi, who chewed them all day long. Police saw from the diary that Attu had been responsible for obtaining medicines: Vitamin A tablets, creams for skin diseases — and tablets for heart palpitations! Also listed were payments of

twenty rupees a time to boatmen for crossing rivers; another entry showed that one of Mustaqim's lieutenants, Baladin, had sent home 3,000 rupees in two months.

Attu, as it turned out, did not need any of his own medicine. The police bullet had caused a nasty graze but had not broken bones. He told Phoolan that he would rest up in a friendly village for a while and join the gang later. She, meanwhile, though temporarily shaken by the encounter, was determined to continue her run of dacoities.

But the raids did nothing to relieve her burning desire to avenge her dead lover and her own rape. 'I am sure,' she said to Man Singh, 'that Baijamau is riddled with informers who would have told Sriram and Lalaram that Vikram was there.'

Baijamau, just a few miles from Behmai, was in fact dominated by Thakurs. It was part of what was known locally as *chaurasi gaon*, or 84 villages, which were grouped together because of the geography of the region and the fact that the majority of residents were Thakurs.

'How else,' she asked, 'would those pigs know that Vikram Mallah was there? He went back to Baijamau because he did not think anyone would believe he would go back to the place where he was shot. Some shit talked.'

'What are you saying, Phoolan Devi?'

'Baijamau must be punished.'

Phoolan Devi knew Baijamau well. She knew where the non-Thakurs lived and when, guns firing in the air, she and Man Singh led the gang into the village she pointed out the houses that were not to be touched. They raided 90 homes and Phoolan Devi showed no courtesy. She prodded men hard with the point of her gun and cursed at the women. In each house she demanded to know who had told the Singh brothers about Vikram's return, but, as she expected, she received nothing but looks of terror.

'Remember me,' she told them all. 'Do not fool with Phoolan Devi.'

Her warning spread through the Thakur villages but received little attention — how dare a low-caste whore order them around? Shortly after the raid on Baijamau a group of

Thakur residents in Behmai accepted an invitation from a distant relative of Phoolan Devi to go to his village to mark the completion of his pilgrimage. At the time, they had not realised the invitation had been issued by a Sudra. The guests, who included people from other villages, sat in the main square and were served *katch khana*, consisting of rice, *rotis* and *dhal*. The food was offered up by a Mallah and, on seeing this, the Thakurs from Behmai refused to touch it and walked away, deeply offending their hosts.

Word reached Phoolan Devi. Her relative had been insulted.

'So it was Behmai again!' she hissed. 'When I return to that village, it will not be just to rob, like at Baijamau.'

She was now making quite a name for herself. She had won the respect of her fellow *baghis* for her unmatched personal courage, her fanatical loyalty, her extraordinary powers of intuition and her ability with firearms. She operated with such ruthlessness that it was hard to remember that originally Man Singh had been the gang's leader. For his part, her paramour was content to bask in the shadow of the reputation she was beginning to acquire. Throughout the ravine area, villagers whispered of Dasyu Sundari, the Beautiful Robber.

Meanwhile, south of Behmai, in Damanpur village, the Singh brothers were recruiting their own gang. Unafraid of reprisals for the murder of Vikram, they tested the strength of their new group by setting out on a purge against low-caste hamlets, showing no mercy to the inhabitants, shooting them down and burning their houses.

Again, the news reached Phoolan Devi. Her own caste begged that she strike back in their defence.

'I must hunt these pigs down. Give me a few men,' she demanded of Man Singh.

'No. It is time to call in Mustaqim and Ram Avtar,' was all he replied.

It was several weeks before the gangs could be mustered. Never before had 80 dacoits linked up at the request of a woman. In addition to Mustaqim, the leaders were Balwan Singh, Ram Avtar and Man Singh. Balwan Singh was

accompanied by another woman dacoit, Meera Thakur, who eyed Phoolan with a tinge of jealousy — Meera did not enjoy the same status as Phoolan Devi.

The gangs met on the east bank of the Yamuna and Mustaqim, reluctant to concede that the meeting had been called at the behest of Phoolan Devi, told them they had gathered on instructions from Malkhan Singh to demarcate boundaries, so that inter-gang clashes could be avoided. Present at the meeting was an informer from the village of Khojarampur, north of Behmai, and he had what was for Phoolan Devi sensational news. He understood that Sriram and Lalaram Singh were due in Behmai village the following day to mediate, in their role as gang leaders, in a land dispute. In addition a large quantity of jewels were to be brought to Behmai because a wedding party was due to pass through. It was a Thakur custom for gold and expensive ornaments to be handed to a married couple.

People were talking, too, said the informer, about the way the Singh brothers had managed to kill Vikram. While he slept with his uncle, the brothers had jumped on them and rendered them unconscious with chloroform soaked into a cloth. Then, as he lay senseless, they had shot him twice.

'Tomorrow,' said Phoolan Devi, 'when the wedding party reaches Behmai, the Thakurs will be taught a lesson. And Sriram and Lalaram Singh will die.'

It was February 13, 1981, the eve of what the west remembers as St Valentine's Day. But India was to remember the date for a massacre, the horror of which surpassed the bloody events masterminded by Al Capone in Chicago on that same day in 1929.

# CHAPTER NINE

WINTER had ended and spring was blossoming. Between seas of ripening wheat, yellow mustard flowers bloomed. Sometimes a peacock screamed or a jackal howled and in the fields village boys armed with slings chased wild pigs. Buffalo eyes peered out from the surface of the river which covered their black hides while, in the village, men lay on their string beds and women sat around gossiping, churning butter and milling corn.

Behmai village, with a population of 400, lies on the east bank of the Yamuna River, some 75 miles from the city of Kanpur. The River Ganges flows slowly past the big industrial city and on towards Allahabad and Varanasi, the holy place. At Kanpur, the devout wade into its waters at sunrise and remember their deities, praying for deliverance from sickness. Although the Yamuna is a major tributary of Ganga, its waters are used only for washing and fishing; to the villagers who live along its banks it is a cursed river for it cuts into the landscape and carries away the soil. Farmers watch helplessly as the river takes away chunks of their livelihood and pray that next year will not be as bad as the last.

But on the morning of February 14 all cares were lifted. There was great excitement in the village, for a wedding party was due to call there during the afternoon. Two schoolmasters, Virendra Singh and Hari Om, who usually took lessons on Saturdays, had given themselves the day off and now chatted with four college students, Banwari Singh, Naresh Singh, Lal Singh and Ram Chandra Singh.

Lal Singh knew that the afternoon's wedding festivities were to be m. norable: he had taken part in such an event eight months before as the groom, although he had yet to take up residence with his bride because of the *gohona* custom, under which the new wife stays with her family for some time after the marriage. As part of the merrymaking the bridegroom, accompanied by an all-male party, would be visiting the village *en route* to another community, where the garment ends of the bride and groom would be tied together and they would walk around a sacred fire seven times.

Whenever a wedding takes place in the valley, someone always remembers to tell the tale, and it was told again that morning, of the Thakur youth, Shobha, who decided to mingle with the women who remained in the village of Silhaoli on the departure of the groom and his male friends. As the women began their *khoiya*, a sort of hen party in which bawdy songs are sung and suggestive dances performed, Shobha dressed himself as a woman and joined in the fun. It was all too much for him and his masculinity was revealed in an all too obvious fashion; the next day, before a multitude of fellow castemen, he was reproved and beaten with shoes. Disgraced, he ran away to the ravines and joined the gang headed by Lakhan Singh.

In the house of Tulsi Ram, a mason and two labourers were carrying out repairs to the roof while Tulsi Ram sat outside with his two married sons, Rajendra Singh and Surendra Singh, the man who had once thrown Phoolan Devi to the ground in the game of *kabaddi*. That incident was months ago and Surendra had forgotten all about it. He sat now and talked about a man in the village who had injured his hand in an accident with a bullock cart.

The mason and his labourers were among the handful of Sudras who lived in Behmai; and although they were on talking terms with their Thakur neighbours, each caste group was aware of the social division between them. About 40 houses belonged to Thakurs, the remainder being occupied by artisan subcastes, Lohars (blacksmiths), Behnas (cotton spinners), Nais (barbers) and shepherds. The villagers as a

whole made ropes, tended their crops and cattle, dyed cloths and did a little fishing. That was how life went on there and all along the banks of the river.

Baburam, a Sudra, was busy cutting a man's hair. Only his trade as a barber permitted him to touch villagers of a higher caste. A mirror hung from a nail in the wall and he snipped merrily with a long pair of scissors, his customer ensconced in a rickety old chair. At Baburam's side hung his old-fashioned cut-throat razor and a leather strop for sharpening it. Providence had smiled on the barber that morning, since everyone wanted to look smart for the arrival of the wedding party.

Not far away, Balmukand, an energetic, well-built young man, was splitting firewood with an axe and grumbling about how blunt it was.

Dev Prayag Singh sat outside his house twirling the ends of his big black moustache. His neighbours often joked with him, saying that if he grew his hair down to his shoulders he would make a handsome dacoit. He had hoped to go off that morning to join up with the wedding party, but he had become caught up in a few chores and now had to bide his time.

Shakuntala, the wife of Jagannath Singh, was telling her husband to get a move on. She had already eaten her lunch and had even washed up all the pots and pans, but he had only just arrived home. In the hope of getting him to realise how late he was, she had left all the shiny pans outside the house, where they glinted in the sun.

At the back of the main square, Krishna Swarup was feeding some of his cattle. He had kept them in the village because the boy who usually tended them was sick. Watching him was Ram Adhar Singh, a rather nervous young man who, through his great fear that one day he might meet a band of dacoits, rarely left the village centre.

Further up the main path Sohan Singh, a cripple, lay on his bed in the shade of his house, talking to a neighbour. Five years earlier Sohan had fallen from a roof he was repairing and broken his back. He had to rely on his family now,

including his brother Banwari, the college student, who carried him if he wanted to go to another part of the village. But most of the time he just lay outside the house.

A number of village men were still out in the fields trying to get in a final couple of hours work before the wedding party arrived and a few had already gone off to meet the marriage group.

The sun passed through its zenith. To the north of Behmai, Balmukand Singh and Takhet Singh were sitting on a hillock watching their cattle graze. Suddenly, Takhet grabbed his friend's arm.

'Look!' he whispered, nodding up the valley to where the ravines began. Coming towards them was a large group of people, hardly distinguishable, because their sandy-coloured clothing merged with the parched countryside.

'Police?' asked Balmukand.

'Or *baghis*. I am not going to chance it.'

He pulled his friend back and they slid out of sight. As they stared over the top of the mound they saw that one man was very close and they were surprised they had not seen him — nor he them. The two men were still unsure who the strangers were and for a moment they feared they had been spotted because the lone scout stopped about 50 yards from them. Then he turned to the main group — there must have been 40 or 50 of them — and beckoned them on.

They stopped beside the scout and the two hidden Thakurs saw them all turn to a small altar and, paying their respects to Devi Mata, ask for guidance.

'*Baghis!*' said Balmukand. 'Do you think they are looking for husbands?'

Wedding ceremonies in the villages are often filled with danger; there are valuable gifts ripe for picking, as well as large contingents of young unmarried men who are potential victims for shotgun weddings. Parents of nubile daughters, unable to meet soaring dowry demands, have resorted to hiring dacoits to abduct grooms and force them into matrimony at the point of a gun. In Bihar State, next to Uttar Pradesh, more than 500 enforced marriages took place in a

two-month period in 1981. Officials have found out that the most popular venue for grabbing grooms is weddings, where single men abound and kidnappings go unnoticed. The practice is not unknown in Uttar Pradesh, so it was not surprising that the two shepherds wondered if their own village was to lose a resident or two to the shackles of matrimony.

But then Balmukand cried: 'Look, there is a woman! Do you recognise her, Takhet Singh?'

'Oh my God, it's Phoolan Devi! There is going to be terrible trouble.'

They lay still. There was nothing they dare do but watch the gang move off towards the village.

'Let us pray for our loved ones,' said Takhet Singh.

Minutes later, they heard shots. They knew that the *baghis* had entered the village.

On the outskirts, a group of children had seen them coming. They ran into the village shouting 'Police! Police!', but then the sound of gunfire warned the residents that they were about to be raided by a bandit gang. By the time the group entered the village the place was virtually deserted. Sohan Singh, the cripple, was still outside in his cot, for his relatives had not had time to pull him in and they thought that if he lay quietly he might not be seen. They had quickly locked the door of the house and run to a neighbour. Now, as he lay immobile, he realised he had been spotted. Nine, no, ten *baghis* walked towards him. He had time to count them, but he did not recognise any of them. They were rough-looking and unshaven. One immediately hauled himself onto the roof of the house and looked around the village. Another pointed a rifle at his face and swore at him. The rest stood and watched as the dacoit demanded the house keys.

'Please, I am only a cripple. I have no keys,' said Sohan Singh. They asked him once more, and again he said he did not have them. Suddenly the man with the rifle spun it around and smashed the butt into Sohan's ribs. He cried out in pain. And then they beat him with bamboo sticks, beat him on the chest and around the head until he almost passed out.

He heard them boot the door in, heard pots being smashed inside, pans kicked. He could hardly breathe with the pain in his chest.

They came out clutching armfuls of clothing. One of them said, 'You have an elder brother. He has a licence for a muzzle-loading gun. Where is the gun?'

Sohan Singh was amazed by their knowledge. He told them the truth. 'My brother does not live with me any more. He lives in another part of the village.' A note was dropped on his chest.

'Those are our names,' said the dacoit. 'Remember them well. You have not seen the last of us.'

Sohan Singh was too frightened to touch the piece of paper. He lay there snatching in air and watched as the men walked away towards the centre of the village.

In the square, Phoolan Devi led a group of twelve men up to the house of the *sarpanch*, Taqdir Ramgulam Singh, who was away for the day. The bandits wore police uniforms, of rank according to their standing in the gang. Phoolan Devi was wearing the uniform of a superintendent and zippered boots. Jumping onto the edge of the well, where she had once been made to draw water naked through the night, she raised a megaphone.

'Listen to me, you motherfuckers. You are surrounded. Anyone who tries to interfere or escape will be shot, like the filthy dogs that you are.'

She waited a moment for the echo from the ravines to die before repeating her warning.

'Now bring Lalaram and Sriram Singh out to me!'

Nothing moved in the village but a white cow, slowly continuing on its way past Phoolan Devi and her flank of *baghis*. From one of the houses a woman began to cry.

The bandit girl put the megaphone to her lips. 'You motherfuckers! Bring the dogs out!'

But nobody came.

'Bring them, or I'll shove my shotgun up your asses and blast your stupid heads off!'

When there was still no response, she ordered: 'Search the

houses! And bring every man to me!'

Instantly, most of the dacoits with her dispersed and, joined by the remainder of the gang who had scattered throughout the village, began smashing their way into houses. Now women screamed and men cried out for mercy. In his cot Sohan Singh trembled with fear. He should not have told them about his brother. But if he had lied they would have returned to kill him. He could not be sure they would not return anyway.

One by one the young men of the village were dragged or pushed to the well, where Phoolan Devi stood, legs astride, Mauser level at her waist. Her dark hair was cut short, so that from a distance it was difficult to see that she was a woman. The men huddled in a frightened group and she stared down angrily and defiantly at them.

'You ugly sons of the devil!' she suddenly screamed at the half-dozen who looked fearfully at her. 'Did you think you could get away with what you did to me?'

Jumping from her pedestal, she again asked where Lalaram and Sriram Singh were hiding. One of the men, Tulsi Ram, dared to say, 'They are not here. We have not seen them.'

She marched over and smashed him in the face with her rifle butt. Yet he managed to remain standing, blood pouring from his broken nose. Rajendra Singh and his brother Surendra watched horrified, powerless to help their father.

While the raids and searches of the houses were continuing, Balmukand, who had been splitting firewood, decided to try to escape and get help. The closest Police Armed Constabulary camp was at Khojarampur, about two miles away. Balmukand had a bicycle and he quietly pushed it around the back of the houses. Pedalling his way to the north of the village, he saw two dacoits and stopped sharply, fearing they would shoot him down. Then he darted past them and made his escape onto the track running through the ravines.

As more men were brought out, Phoolan Devi counted them. The wailing in the village increased as the women

peered from their doors and saw the treatment handed out to their husbands and sons . . . the kicking, the hitting with rifles. Those women who had never before had dealings with dacoits had heard that when *baghis* robbed they did the job quickly and escaped without causing injury, unless anyone made trouble. But their men, although obedient, were still beaten. Something was terribly wrong.

Ram Avtar, one of the gang leaders who had joined Phoolan, Man Singh and Balwan Singh for the combined raid, ran to Phoolan, a number of stolen guns under his arm.

'The Singh brothers are not here,' he said. 'We have been misinformed.'

She spat angrily at the ground and stamped her foot. 'Which of you,' she said to the captive villagers, 'are not Thakurs?'

After a moment's hesitation Baburam, the barber, stepped forward.

'Stand to one side,' she ordered.

'Oh, please, please . . .' he begged, fearing that he had been selected for execution.

'Shut up, old man! Stop your foolish whimpering!' Then she ordered him to leave.

Three more men were dragged to the village centre. These were the mason and his two labourers. They were too late to hear Phoolan Devi ask those who were not Thakurs to identify themselves. And she did not ask again. They were pushed into the main group.

The captured villagers were surrounded by dacoits. Phoolan Devi wanted to know which of them had been to the feast of her relative to celebrate his pilgrimage. All indicated they had. And which of them had eaten the *katch khana* that had been offered? Not understanding the purpose of her question, about a dozen men said they had.

'Find out which houses these men live in,' she instructed the dacoits. 'And steal nothing from them. Their women will be left with something. As for the rest, take all you can.'

While the dacoits set about finding which of the houses should not be robbed, Phoolan Devi surveyed the village. She

could not believe her arch-enemies had escaped. And where was the wedding party with its valuables?

It would not be coming that afternoon, for Balmukand was not the only villager to sneak away. A group of women working in the fields scuttled off as soon as they heard the initial shots and headed down the track along which the marriage group was expected. Their mission was to stop the party and send it back whence it came.

Phoolan Devi walked up to one of the captives and pushed the end of her rifle hard up under his chin so that he had to stand on tiptoe to ease the discomfort.

'Where are Lalaram and Sriram Singh, you fucker? Where are they?'

'As God is my witness, I do not know! They are not here!'

From one of the houses a woman started screaming and was suddenly silenced. A little later, as Phoolan Devi continued to question the men, a dacoit came out of the house tying up his trouser cord. Seeing this, one of the captives turned to run to the house, but he was smashed on the back of the head with a bamboo stick. He cowered on the ground as two guns were trained on him. In other houses, chains were ripped from the women and rings torn from fingers and toes. The terror went on for over an hour. In all that time, Phoolan Devi had not stopped demanding the whereabouts of the Singh brothers. Again and again the villagers insisted they had not seen them for months.

'You!' she said to Krishna Swarup. 'Come here!'

The young father shuffled slowly up to her. 'When they were here, did you feed them?'

'Oh no, lady. Not I.'

'Point out those who gave them shelter.'

'I do not know. You must please believe me. I know nothing about them.'

She thumped the gun hard into his chest, sending him sprawling back into the group.

'You are liars! You are all filthy liars!'

She heard someone mutter. She heard the voice say, 'She is the filthy liar. She is nothing but a prostitute.'

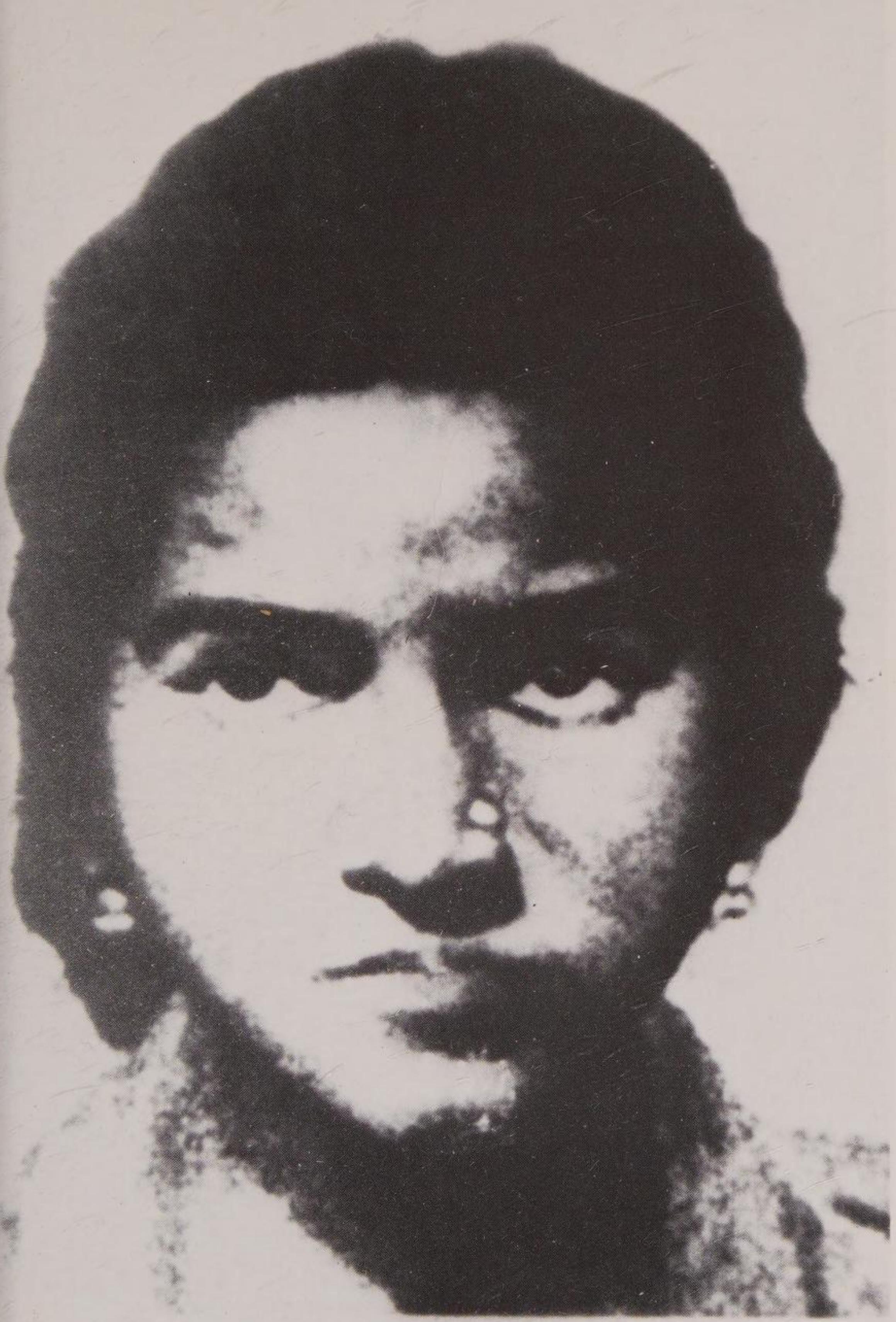

**Fig. 1** A police artist's impression of Phoolan Devi, drawn during her months on the run. He combined the features of Phoolan's younger sister, Ramkali, and an Indian film actress. Knowing that police had no true likeness of her, Phoolan Devi was able to walk past city officers on several occasions.

**Fig. 2** Phoolan Devi's relatives, including her mother, Moola (second left), her father Devidin (centre) and her brother Shivnarain (right, foreground). They are pictured in the house they were provided with in Gwalior.

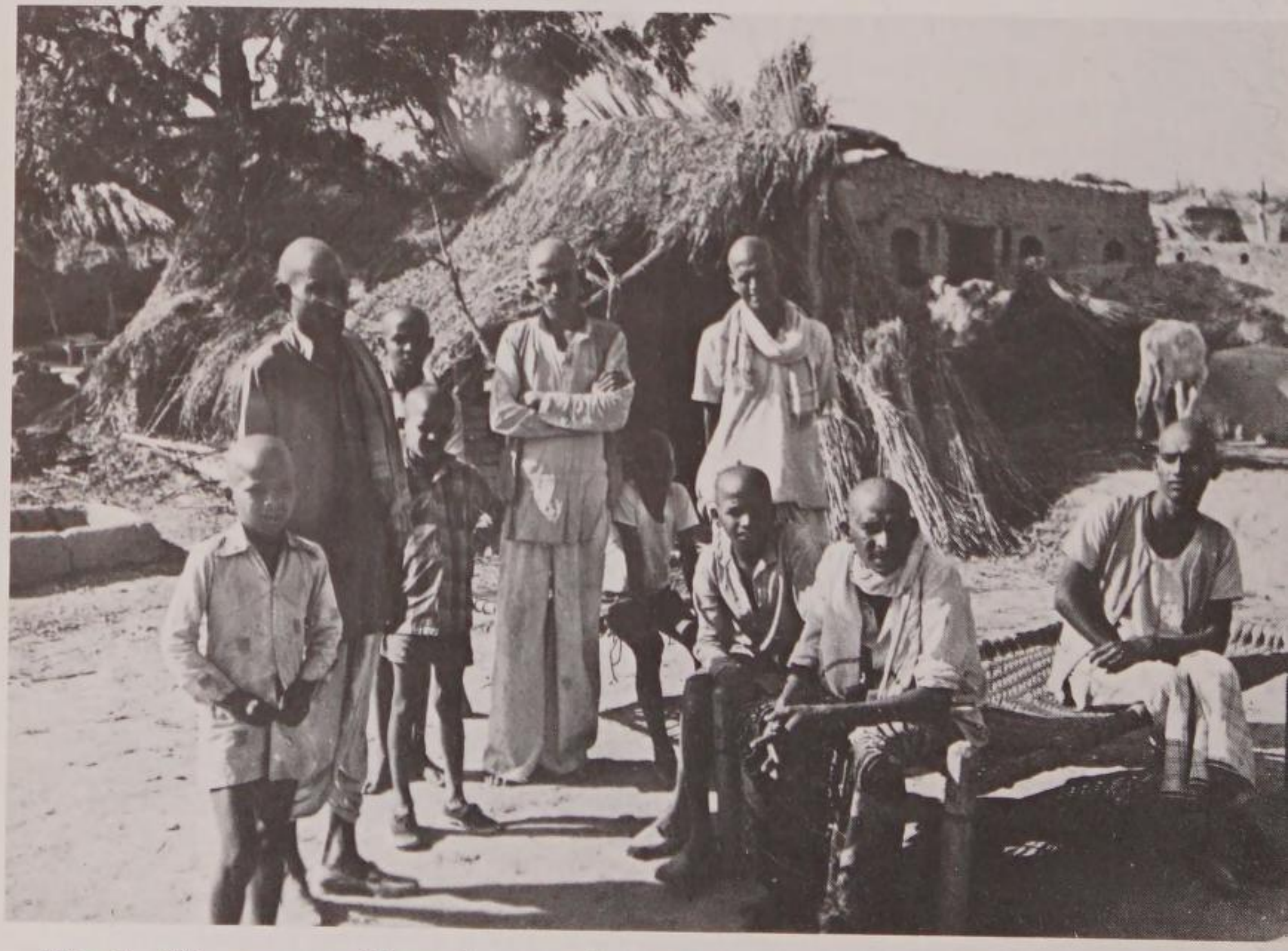

**Fig. 3** The massacred have been carried away and now these male survivors of Behma have shaved their heads in a traditional sign of mourning.

**ig. 4** The end of the line for five dacoits. They were gunned down in an encounter with olice in the Chambal Valley and their bodies propped up on public display as a deterrent to her bandits. As the picture shows, running shoes are popular among dacoits.

**ig. 5** Rounded hilltops formed by ravine erosion provide perfect ambush locations for olice patrols.

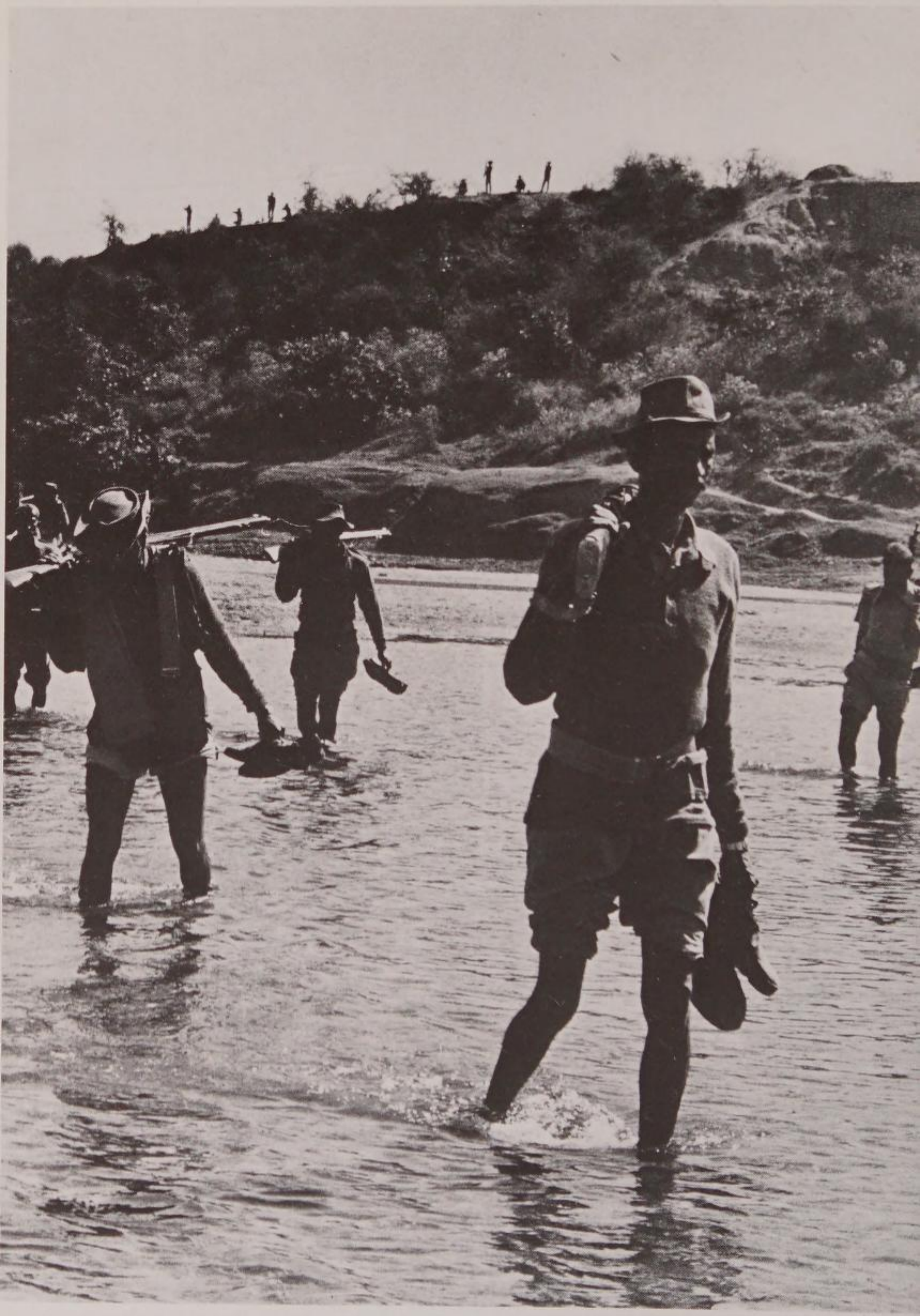

**Fig. 6** A police party crosses a shallow river cutting through the Chambal Valley ravines. Behind, their colleagues line a ridge scouring the landscape.

ig. 7 Bandit leader Ghanshyam
ter his surrender.

g. 8 Phoolan Devi and her para-
ur, Man Singh, are brought in for
estioning after they agreed to
render.

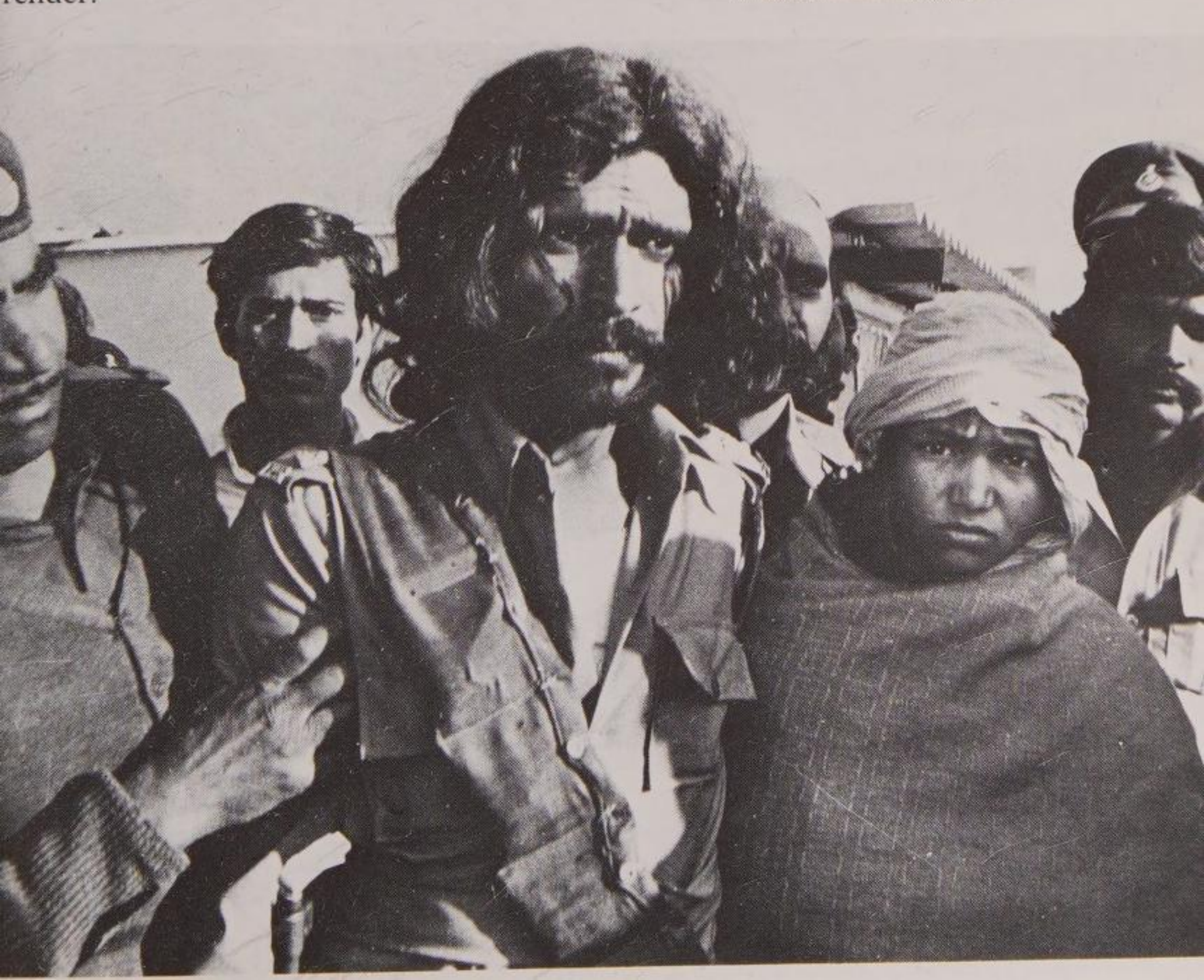

**Fig. 9** Accompanied by a henchman a proud Phoolan Devi walks to a waiting police vehicle.

**Fig. 10** The surrender. Stooping in her running shoes, Phoolan Devi touches the feet of Chief Minister Arjun Singh.

**ig. 11** The Bandit Queen cknowledges the large crowd hich gathered at Bhind to atch her give herself up.

**Fig. 12** At last behind bars, he woman police could not atch has time to reflect.

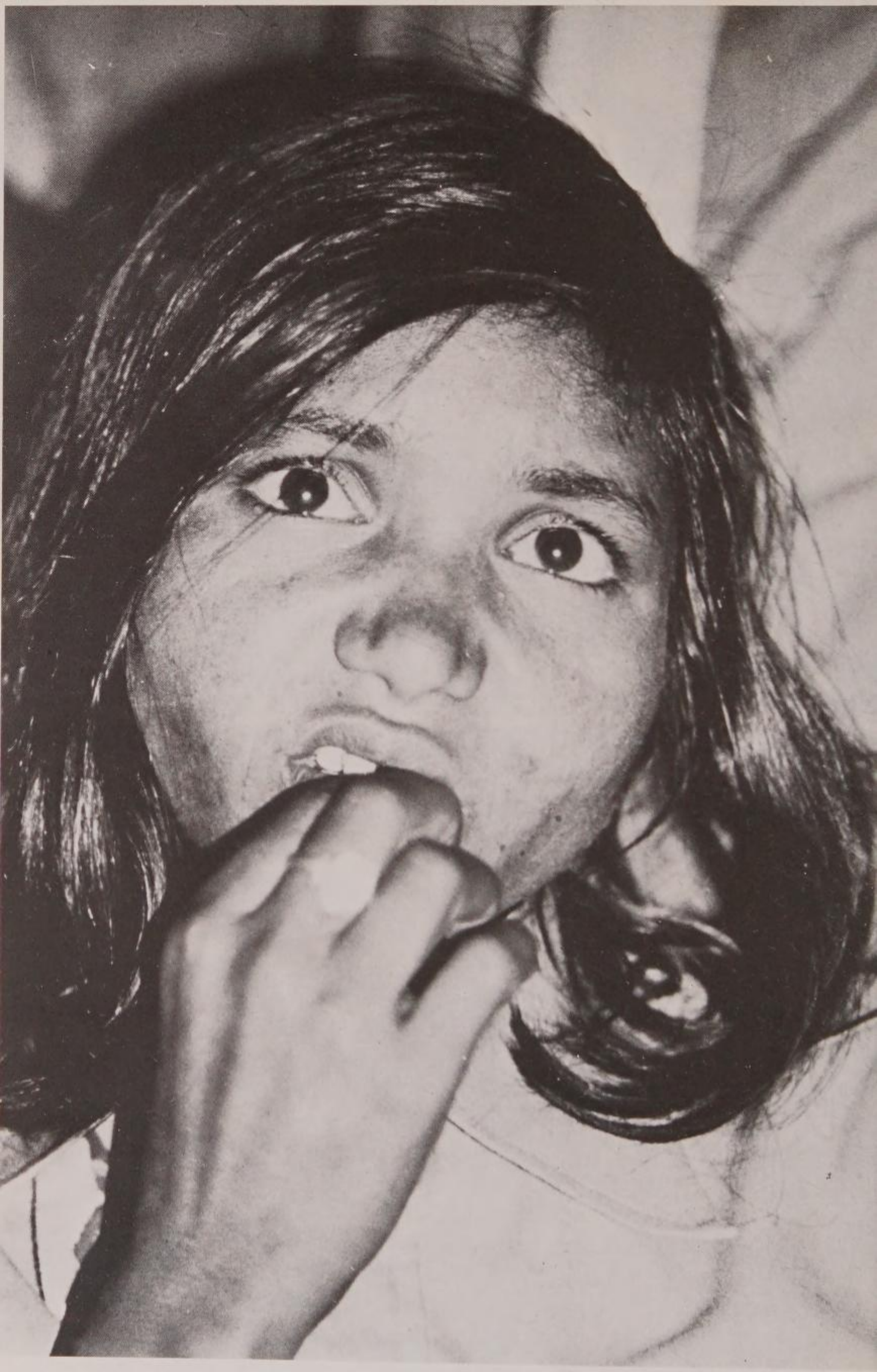

**Fig. 13** Behind the façade of an infamous bandit is just another twenty-year-old.

Her chest heaved with anger. She stalked around the group, thumping her left hand against the barrel of the Mauser. One of the villagers was to say later that she was counting them. And then she saw Surendra Singh, the man who had humiliated her in the game of *kabaddi*.

'So, you motherfucker. You think you can play games with Phoolan Devi?' She grabbed him by the hair and pulled him towards the well.

'You will regret that you ever crossed me, Phoolan Devi, Queen of Dacoits,' she screamed. Then she stepped back, raised the rifle and fired twice at his legs, the bullets smashing his knees. The villagers saw his mouth snap open in shock and pain and his body jerk up, as if he was trying to hop away; but he fell heavily to the ground, screaming. His cries were so intense that they echoed back from the ravines, and the village dogs scattered. He rolled in the dust, gasping, beating his arms on the ground, trying to escape the agony. His blood mingled with the dirt, and then he vomited.

'Please lady, end it; end it!' somebody cried from the group of captives.

But it was not to finish yet. The dacoits watched, Phoolan Devi watched, as the squirming lessened, the screams grew fainter. Surendra Singh had no more energy to thrash and cry, but his face told of his suffering.

At last, Phoolan Devi walked up to him, pointed the rifle at the back of his head, close to his neck, and casually pulled the trigger, shattering his spinal cord and killing him instantly. A wail rose up from the villagers. Several of them were physically sick and one, Ram Adhar Singh, the nervous man of the village, fainted.

The woman bandit jumped up onto the concrete base of the well and said, 'This is your last chance! Produce Lalaram and Sriram.'

Some of the men were in tears. 'If only we could tell you! If only we knew!'

She looked around at the bandit leaders, Man Singh, Ram Avtar and Balwan Singh. Mustaqim had lent her some of his men but he himself had not come, saying he was ill. She

suspected that was an excuse, and that he knew she was going to teach the Thakurs a lesson. Kidnapping was more his line. She caught the eye of Ram Avtar and nodded. He shouted an instruction to the dacoits and the villagers were herded off. Ram Adhar Singh, who had come out of his faint, staggered across to the well and fell to the ground below Phoolan Devi's feet as if he were entreating a goddess.

'Oh mercy, mercy! Please have mercy on me!'

'Take him away!' she commanded, and one of the dacoits picked him up and slung him on his shoulder.

Krishna Swarup's legs felt like rubber. He was surprised they could support him at all and he had to concentrate on each step.

'What are they going to do to us?' asked one of his neighbours, the student Naresh Singh.

'I fear for my life,' said Krishna, though how he got the words out he did not know, for his throat was as dry as the earth.

Behind him he heard men wailing as they headed away from the village towards the river. Rajendra Singh was repeating his murdered brother's name over and over like an incantation at a cremation. Krishna glanced at him and saw that his eyes were closed as he walked: only the jostling of his fellow captives kept him in the right direction.

Shreedevi, Surendra's wife, stood in the doorway of their house clutching a child against her breast. She did not know that a short distance away her husband's blood was running across the village square and that the other male members of her family were being herded like cattle towards the river.

'What is happening down there?' she called to a neighbour.

'I do not know. But did you hear the shots?'

'My God, yes, I heard them. I am so afraid.'

'And me. Come to my house and wait. We should not go out yet.'

Dead sticks crackled under the feet of the captives and Banwari Singh, another of the students, asked the schoolmaster Hari Om to pray for him. Hari Om replied, sadly, 'I have not time to pray for you. I have no time to pray for

myself.' Krishna Swarup heard that and realised he had not even thought about praying.

Dev Prayag Singh saw one of his friends, Jagannath Singh, glance back up the track. They were on a slope and the wall of one of the buildings, surrounded by a few trees, was all that could be seen of the village now.

Dev Prayag could not help thinking about the words one of the dacoits had used. 'Today,' he had said, 'is the day when we shall take revenge.' Revenge for what? Dev Prayag asked himself. Could it be that business of the *katch khana*? Well, he was not guilty of showing the Mallahs disrespect because he had partaken of the food. And, yes, he knew about Phoolan Devi's rape some months back but he had kept his nose out of that business. That was something between her and the Singh brothers.

Jagannath Singh's wife, Shakuntala, sat sobbing in the darkest room in the house. The dacoits had been so cruel. 'Tell us where Lalaram and Sriram are, or we'll fuck you to death,' they had said. And her pans, her lovely shiny pans that she had spent so long cleaning and polishing ... they'd taken them all. Even the spoons and forks.

Dev Prayag looked up and saw the vultures circling; it had not taken them long to know that blood was flowing. Ram Chandrah Singh noticed them, too. He was due to finish college that year and he hoped to get work as a banker. But he had also toiled in his father's fields and he knew how those birds could pluck the flesh off a dead cow. It could be stripped to the bone within hours and then the bloated vultures would have to run along the ground, getting up speed to take off like the planes he had seen at Kanpur airport.

Close to the edge of the river, where the track from the village ran out onto the muddy bank, Ram Avtar ordered them to stop. Dev Prayag Singh looked among the dacoits for Phoolan Devi, wondering what she would order next, but he could not see her. Dev Prayag did not know Ram Avtar's name, but he saw that he was wearing a police officer's pips, just like Phoolan Devi.

'Spread out and kneel down,' ordered this man.

Krishna Swarup wet his pants at that moment. But that was nothing; the man next to him vomited and lost control of his bowels at the same time. Krishna didn't look to see who it was; what did it matter?

'Kneel, you fuckers, kneel!' commanded the man with the pips. Some of the captives fell to their knees; others had to be pushed down. Then they were asked to raise their hands.

'Please ...' someone said as they faced the cluster of dacoits.

'Kill the fuckers!'

The shooting started. Some of the guns were very loud, but others sounded almost harmless, like two flat pieces of wood being slapped together. The firing squad were only six to ten yards away, and some of the villagers caught three or four bullets at once. Dev Prayag Singh, who was kneeling slightly behind the main body of villagers, felt a tremendous force, like an axe, burning hot, strike him in the chest, and as he fell over sideways, other bullets hit him in the legs. He could feel his blood gushing out from the hole in his chest — there was a tremendous weight on him and he was gasping for breath. But he knew that if he was thinking and feeling he must still be alive and then he realised that someone dead was lying on top of him. The guns still cracked out. Lie still, he told himself, lie still. It was a frightening thing to stay there without moving, to feel your blood running out of your body and not be able to stop it. He had to take in huge volumes of air, because somehow it helped to lessen the pain in his legs. The firing continued and he could hear his neighbours, his friends, groaning and screaming. There was a hand near his face and it was jerking as if someone was pulling it on a piece of string. He heard a voice shouting repeatedly 'That one!' and then a gun would go off. The guns fired and fired and fired and the tall man with the big moustache lay immobile, feeling the warmth of his blood running down his chest and over his arm.

Krishna Swarup was so frightened when they told him to kneel that he fell to the ground. His pants were soaking. He knew, without any room for doubt, what they were going to

do. Phoolan Devi had a look of victory and he had seen her nod to the other dacoit who seemed to share command of the gang. It was clear that this had all been arranged. They had come to the village to kill Thakurs and all those robberies, all those insults, had been games leading up to the big event.

'Kill the fuckers ...!'

When that shout had gone out, Krishna Swarup had felt a pain in his shoulder and immediately lost consciousness. He was not aware of the others who fell on top of him.

Lal Singh, who had been looking forward to moving in with his bride soon, told someone close to him, even as they were ordered to kneel, that there was nothing to worry about. Dacoits, he had heard, often tortured people in this way — made them think they were going to do some shooting and then let them off. He'd heard they even went as far as pulling the trigger on an empty chamber.

The police, another villager was thinking: they were only a few miles distant. Surely someone from the village would have run for help. It would have taken only half an hour or so to get to the police camp at Khojarampur and they should now be on their way. Why, they might even be watching us right now, waiting for the moment to attack these pigs of *baghis*. They should all be shot down where they stood, just as they had shot poor Surendra Singh.

Ram Avtar stood back and looked at the pile of bodies; 24 men lay still under a blanket of cordite fumes. Baladin, Mustaqim's right-hand man, who had joined in the firing, saw a finger twitching, but he had killed enough men in the past to know that this was just a reflex action. Blood was spilling out like a fountain from a hole in the side of one of the victims' head.

'Are they finished?' Ram Avtar asked.

'Every one of them,' said Baladin.

Phoolan Devi surveyed the scene from a higher part of the track.

'Here is your revenge, Phoolan Devi,' Ram Avtar called and fired another shot into the tangle of bodies. She nodded and turned back towards the village. The bandits followed as

she walked past the crumpled form of Surendra Singh and headed away from the main square. The dacoits gathered up armfuls of stolen goods: rifles, clothing, ornaments and Shakuntala's pots and pans. Phoolan Devi saw Sohan Singh lying on his bed and went across to him. She saw the piece of paper on his chest containing the names of all the dacoits who had visited the village — a list that is traditionally given out whenever a raid is staged.

'I heard shooting,' he said. 'Have people been killed?'

'Was I ever raped?'

Missing the point of her reply, Sohan Singh asked, 'Am I to be killed?'

She pushed him with her rifle. 'Killing a disabled man is no chivalry,' she said, and walked away.

Long before he had reached Khojarampur, Balmukand began shouting for the police as he cycled through the ravines. He was aware that he risked being shot down by members of the gang who might be positioned this far out, but if his cries reached the police and got them moving early it was certainly worth taking the chance.

'Help!' he shouted. 'Help! Behmai is under attack by *baghis*!'

His cries were taken up by residents of Khojarampur who ran beside his bicycle shouting with him. At the PAC outpost, men were stripped to the waist, playing volleyball.

'Come, come, please come, we are being robbed by dacoits at Behmai!' Balmukand cried. But the game continued. His shouts and pleas were ignored.

'Leave us alone! There are always robberies, every day.'

Balmukand got off his bicycle, stood it against a tree, sat down and cried.

Lalaram Singh and his brother were not far from Bemai when the massacre took place. Since Vikram Mallah's death and Phoolan Devi's escape from their custody, they had taken up with their former mistress, Kusuma Nain, whom they shared. She had been hanging around the gangs for years. As a youngster she had a reputation as 'a wayward wench beyond

reform'. After rejoining the Singh brothers she told them about a friend of hers in Damanpur village, Shivnarain Nai, who had sold a plot of land to one Bishwambher Thakur twelve years earlier. Bishwambher had not paid the full amount. Kusuma Nain asked the brothers to mediate in the dispute and on February 14 they found themselves in Damanpur. The informant who told Phoolan Devi that the brothers would be in Behmai had almost got it right; but not quite. Damanpur was a few miles to the south-east. Late in the afternoon, while the Singh brothers relaxed with their woman, the news reached Damanpur that Phoolan Devi had attacked Behmai, and that many villagers had been shot. Stunned, the brothers immediately gathered their gang of Thakurs together and headed for Behmai.

The carnage on the riverside, the screaming, wailing widows, the dazed workers from the fields, raised the blood of the Singh brothers and they hurried on north, travelling by foot, on the trail of Phoolan Devi and her gang. Close to Chholapur, between Behmai and Khojarampur, they were fired at. One of the gang yelled as a bullet struck him. The Singh brothers realised that Phoolan's gang had posted 'back guards' around the hilltops and that to proceed on the same track would be suicidal.

'We are close to the PAC post at Khojarampur,' Sriram said to his brother. 'Tell them we are prepared to help them catch these animals.'

'I don't trust the police,' said Lalaram. 'I'll take this' — and with a megaphone and a handful of men he dodged around the guards and hurried to the hills overlooking the police post. Lalaram called to the *jawans*, who had finished their volleyball, that he and his brother were willing to help hunt down the murderers of Behmai. But there was no response.

When she heard the firing behind her, Phoolan Devi took her gang towards the river at the hamlet of Zari where boats had been left earlier. Some of Mustaqim's men had broken off and headed due east into the ravines to link up with their

leader. But Phoolan crossed the small None river to a point near the village of Mukdalan, opposite Gorhapurwa. She fired two shots in the air — a pre-arranged signal to her own village that food must be sent across to them. She had sent a message earlier that day to tell the village she would probably need supplies. If no-one else helped, she knew her mother would do something.

That afternoon, Dhruv Lal Yadav, sub-inspector at Kalpi police station, was visiting the Mangraul PAC outpost near Gorhapurwa. Mr Yadav was a man of initiative, and he never accepted things at face value. His theory was that if he saw a man running during the middle of the day there was a good reason for it and the man should be stopped and questioned. So when he heard two gunshots from across the None, shortly after receiving news of the Behmai massacre, he considered there had to be a connection. He quickly mustered a number of PAC and three regular constables and, unable to find a boat, they waded across the None River. The water came up to their necks, and they had to hold their rifles high. There was no trace of any gang on the other side, but Yadav kept searching as darkness thickened. At about two in the morning Yadav heard a voice call, '*Kaun hai?* Who is there?' He had seen and spoken to Ram Avtar in jail and immediately recognised his voice. He signalled his men to keep down and they crawled forward on their hands and knees. The fact that Avtar had called indicated to Yadav that they were not surrounded and that the dacoit did not know they were police. Otherwise they would have been gunned down. So he saw the situation as being to his advantage. His men were armed with sophisticated weapons, and the PAC members knew how to take care of themselves. What he wanted the dacoits to believe was that they were another gang. Then he heard Ram Avtar loading his gun from somewhere up in the darkness just ahead. At that moment one of his men panicked and let loose a blast from his automatic rifle. A few shots were returned, the bullets thudding into the soft earth and forcing the police to keep their heads down. And then Yadav heard an extraordinary

sound — the high, metallic voice of a woman, penetrating the cool night air:

*Himmat na ho to chudiyan le jao;*
*Goliyan na ho to goliyan le jao.*
If you don't have guts, take bangles from me;
If you have no bullets, take bullets.

Yadav ordered his men to hold their fire. The voice taunted: 'Why are you pursuing us so silently? Start firing, call out.'

Yadav then answered with more shots. The fire was not returned. The eerie voice stayed silent. And when at last Yadav dared to investigate he realised that the gang had fled through the nearby *arhar* fields, leaving behind goods looted from Behmai.

'We have lost them,' Yadav muttered. 'Who knows when that gang of killers will be so close to capture again?'

Despite the stars, the night was pitch black. The day just passed would long be remembered. Never before had a Sudra killed so many of a higher caste. Never before had a woman been responsible for such a terrible crime.

# CHAPTER TEN

WHILE PHOOLAN DEVI and her gang were turning Behmai into a graveyard, the Deputy Inspector-General of Kanpur range, Mr Vinod Jain, was holding a news conference. Unaware of the savage massacre occurring 80 miles away, he assured the public that the police were taking 'elaborate steps' to check the activities of dacoits, particularly in the ravines on the east side of the Yamuna, where Behmai is situated. But something was sadly lacking in police intelligence that afternoon, for it was nearly two hours after the dacoits had left the scene of the carnage before the first party of PACs arrived. And they were not from Khojarampur but from police outposts at Baijamau and Zafrapur, more than three miles away. They had decided to investigate after hearing gunfire.

Night had fallen by the time they arrived. Cries and prayers rose from every house. Whimpering, hungry children wandered in bewilderment through the narrow pathways. Almost every family had lost husbands, fathers, sons and brothers.

When they caught sight of the police uniforms, men and women screamed, scattering in panic, for they thought the killers had returned. A senior policeman called through his megaphone, his tinny voice reassuring the villagers that they were, indeed, police, but it was some time before the situation calmed sufficiently for the officers to find out what had happened.

Lal Singh's teenage widow, who had not even lived with her murdered husband because of the dowry restriction, was too shocked even to cry.

'He was so young,' she said to a policeman. 'Why could an old man not have died instead of him?'

Nearby, the widow of Tulsi Ram sat on her bed and silently mourned the death of her husband and two sons. Shakuntala, whose husband Jagannath Singh had also been killed, told one of the police officers, 'They took everything I had. They even took my cooking utensils. Why did they have to take my cooking utensils?'

The body of Surendra Singh lay by the well, his widow kneeling at his side with two of her children clinging to her skirt. Her father, her brother and her husband had all died that afternoon. As a group of police approached, flashing torches, the children bawled, terrified. Shreedevi did not even look up. She had cried away all her tears.

The police were led to the river bank, where the killings had taken place. When the shots were fired, the victims had fallen over each other in a bloody heap. Villagers had since laid the bodies out in a line, pulling them apart on hearing groans from the pile. Seven men were found alive, and had been sent by cart to the main road eight miles away, where they had been taken to hospital at Kanpur by truck. Three died on the way, bringing the death toll to twenty. Those who escaped because they hid or stayed in the fields told the police what had happened. Women had been raped. Children had been kicked out of the way. Phoolan Devi had taken personal command of the shooting and had watched while the men were gunned down. She had stood on a rooftop singing a love song, her voice soaring above the bloodletting. Then she had shouted through the megaphone, 'No-one will forget the name of Phoolan Devi!'

She had also warned that she could return at any moment or turn up in any village as long as Lalaram and Sriram Singh were on the run. Every Thakur village, she had said, would be under suspicion of sheltering them until she had gained the personal satisfaction of gunning them down.

'Phoolan Devi,' one young policeman remarked. 'I have not heard of this dacoit. Who is she?'

'She calls herself the Bandit Queen,' said one of the villagers. 'She cried out "Remember Phoolan Devi. *Jai* (long live) Phoolan Devi, Bandit Queen."'

The police were handed the letter that had been dropped on the cripple Sohan Singh's chest. Addressed to the station house officer of Sikandara police station, which controlled the district, it listed the names of every dacoit who had participated in the raid. At the top were three names: Ram Avtar Singh, prefaced as Kukhyat Dasyu, meaning 'notorious dacoit'; Man Singh, prefaced as Daku Sardar, meaning 'dacoit chief', and also as Chambal ka sher, 'Lion of Chambal'; and Phoolan Devi, prefaced as Dasyu Sundari, 'dacoit beauty'. The letter stated that if the station house officer did not stop protecting the Singh brothers, raids on villages would continue.

That same night, police moved the bodies to a large house and covered the bloodsoaked soil with babool bushes. Villagers begged them to stay in the community, fearing the gang would return. The police agreed to remain in the area to await the arrival of senior officers and doctors who would attend to those suffering from shock.

At dawn, the wailing began again and by sunrise hordes of flies had settled on the sticky blankets covering the dead. The Inspector-General of Police, Mr Mahendra Singh, and his deputy, Mr Jain, had left for Behmai earlier, travelling in one of the two jeeps carrying relief police. They arrived angry and frustrated. The district force had only ten vehicles and the two they had hoped would get them to the village as quickly as possible were badly in need of servicing, coughing and spluttering along the potholed, narrow roads at nine miles an hour.

When he saw the dead villagers, Singh exclaimed, 'Oh my God! What animals have done this?'

Some of the men had already shaved their heads and those of their sons as a sign of mourning. They moved listlessly about the village, like dead men themselves.

Khursheed Ahmed, in charge of anti-dacoity operations in the district, arrived in his jeep and nearly vomited at the sight of the bodies.

'You have seen the letter they left?' asked Mr Jain. 'We know who did it. All we have to do now is catch them.'

Mahendra Singh had also been informed of the items left behind by the gang during the shoot-out the evening before. Included among the looted articles were pieces of the dacoits' clothing along with three letters the police presumed were to be delivered to two other villages and the sub-inspector of the Sikandara police station. Anticipating that they would be hunted, the dacoits warned the sub-inspector to call off the search for the Phoolan Devi gang 'or face the consequences'. The notes were written in English and signed by Ram Avtar Singh.

'I won't rest until we've caught them, ' Mr Ahmed resolved. 'Not caught — eliminated.'

Mahendra Singh surveyed the village from where he stood. 'I don't think they'll move away from familiar ground when they know the pressure is on. It's going to be like looking for a needle in a haystack, but I'll order patrols out into the district anyway.'

As the junior officers moved into the temporary morgue to start carrying the bodies out, relatives ran at them and pushed them away. Their loved ones were not to leave the village, they insisted. They had died there and they would be cremated there. If any post mortems were to be held they must be carried out on those who had died on the way to hospital and who were now already in Kanpur. Khursheed Ahmed, whom the villagers knew, explained that he had to take all the bodies away, and after several hours of argument and discussion they allowed him to take them in his jeep, three at a time, back to Rajpur.

In his hospital bed, Dev Prayag Sing watched a doctor strap a bandage around the bullet hole in his leg.

'How many died?' he asked.

'They say twenty. You were very lucky. They found two

men on top of you. The dacoits must have thought you were dead.'

'I, too, thought I was dead.'

The news had been flashed around the country and government officials were pressuring police chiefs for answers. The District Magistrate in Kanpur, Mr Ram Krishna, was angry the PAC unit at Khojarampur had continued playing volleyball when dacoits were murdering villagers. Inspector-General Mahendra Singh relayed a message to Krishna, saying he was investigating the accusations against the PAC and if they were true every man would be punished and sacked. At state government level, accusations flew thick and fast. Jwala Prasad Kureel, a former politician who knew the Chambal region well, blamed the administration for turning a blind eye to the mounting tension and failing to take effective steps to prevent a violent incident. Villagers of the Sikandara area were now so terrified, he said, that they dare not visit police stations to give information about the activities of bandit gangs. They were afraid informers would report them to the gangs rendering them vulnerable to retaliatory measures. He had heard of one villager who had even been afraid that the police themselves would tell the gangs about him.

When he returned to Lucknow, Deputy Inspector-General Jain faced a barrage of questions from politicians, who knew that they, too, would be in the firing line. When will the murderers be caught and eliminated? was a question put to Jain more times than he could count.

'We will do all we can,' he said. 'Our efforts, though, are hampered by villagers of the same caste as the gangs — they harbour them and feed them information.'

He sat in his office and thought over the problem. The dacoits infested an area covering 6,000 acres — territory that was pitted with ravines and riverbeds offering ideal hiding-places. In the 32 square miles of Uttar Pradesh where they operated there were at least 43 major gangs, but Phoolan Devi's was now at the top of the wanted list.

Jain's telephone rang. It was the State Home Minister

himself, Mr Rajendra Tripathi, who had already been on to other senior police officers. 'If this gang is not captured within fifteen days, there will be dire consequences,' snapped Tripathi.

'Sir, I am doing my best,' said Mr Jain. 'We are all doing our best.'

Already a reward of 10,000 rupees had been put on Phoolan Devi's head, and a specialist in anti-dacoit operations, senior police officer B. P. Singhal, winner of two gallantry awards, was brought in to direct operations. A similar reward had been offered for the capture, dead or alive, of Mustaqim and Ram Avtar. Jain, in consultation with Inspector-General Mahendra Singh, arranged for another four additional companies of the PAC to be rushed to the Yamuna ravines to join the nineteen companies already carrying out a day and night search of the region. Mr Jain decided on two other personal moves: he would recommend that the entire PAC platoon at Khojarampur be suspended, and he would base himself at Kalpi to supervise the operations being carried out jointly by the district police at Etawah, Kanpur, Hamirpur and Jalaun.

But there were public criticisms that all this was too late. The police, it was being said, should have been strong enough to have prevented an incident like the one at Behmai. In the town of Auraiya — where Phoolan Devi went to court — widespread demonstrations broke out when college students learned that one of their friends, Narash Singh, was among those killed. The students staged a lightning strike and paralysed traffic on the highway. They demanded that the army replace the police in searching for dacoits. Markets in Auraiya were closed in protest and census staff, who were in the middle of carrying out a survey, declared they were now too frightened to go into the villages.

The public outcry reached such a peak that the Home Minister personally questioned Inspector-General Mahendra Singh as to why the PACs at Khojarampur had continued playing volleyball and, he had now heard, cards. 'As far as I can ascertain,' said the pressured senior policeman, 'this was

a guard contingent. The main part of the company were out on patrol.' The explanation wasn't good enough. To show that things were being done, Mr Tripathi's government quickly created a new position, Director-General of Police, and awarded it to Inspector-General Singh. It was, in fact, a kick upstairs, a boot out of the way, where he would remain as a 'sleeping member' of the police organisation until his retirement in 1982.

While Mahendra Singh's 'promotion' was viewed with general satisfaction, another move within police ranks caused an outrage. It flared up over the unfair treatment of Mr Alok Lal, the young superintendent of police covering the Kanpur rural district, who was on leave in Lucknow when he learned about the Behmai massacre. Without waiting for any official requests, he immediately cancelled his leave and rushed back to Kanpur to help organise police movements. He spent most of one day briefing the Home Minister on what he had been doing, but he did not know that the Minister had already decided to get rid of him. On his return to the local police station he found an envelope waiting for him. In it were orders transferring him to another district.

Some saw the Behmai massacre as an opportunity to gain political mileage. The removal of Mahendra Singh had been initiated by Sanjay Singh, a friend of the late son of Mrs Indira Gandhi, Sanjay Gandhi. Sanjay Singh, head of the Youth Congress of Uttar Pradesh, used the massacre to attack the shaky state government. The son-in-law of the brother of the Chief Minister, Sanjay had been ignored by the state leadership for some time following the death of Sanjay Gandhi in a plane crash. Being the son of the Raja of Amethi — which had been Sanjay Gandhi's constituency — Sanjay Singh had enjoyed rubbing shoulders with top politicians while Sanjay Gandhi was alive. Hearing now of the Behmai incident, he launched a vilifying attack on the state government and demanded Mahendra Singh's removal. The following day, Mahendra Singh was appointed to his new, tame, position. Sanjay Singh took it further, shaming the government again. While the Chief Minister, Vishwanath

Pratap Singh, was off in the village of Bhognipur condoling with the family of a police inspector who had died in an encounter with another dacoit gang, Sanjay Singh headed for Behmai. He had already beaten the Chief Minister with a visit to Bhognipur, where he had offered his condolences, and now he was taking a political advantage at Behmai. As government blankets arrived for the victims' families and those whose possessions had been looted, and as 5,000 rupees were being handed out to each family who had lost a man, Sanjay Singh made his move. He offered to pay for five guns to be given to police-approved residents — a gesture which delighted the village. Sanjay Singh's offer came in the wake of residents' demands for weapons to defend themselves.

'We cannot depend on the police for our safety any more,' said one man, recalling the volleyball incident. 'We think it is more in our interest to stop paying levies to the government and give protection money to dacoits instead.'

Another man, who was afraid to return to Behmai, was staying with relatives in Lucknow. 'How can the PAC protect us,' he wanted to know, 'when the *jawans* themselves are in collusion with dacoits and sell them cartridges?'

This accusation arose because the police returned the bodies of the dead men to Behmai, saying post mortems were not necessary. Yet in all cases where death is other than natural, be it homicidal, suicidal or accidental, the body must be subjected to an autopsy. Only the three who died on the way to hospital were examined by a pathologist. A rumour spread throughout Thakur villages that the post mortems on the others had been set aside because the official verdict would be that the fatal bullets were police issue. It would be embarrassing for the authorities, said gossip, if it became general knowledge that the dacoits had stolen arms and ammunition from the police — or even had contacts within police ranks who had supplied weapons and bullets.

Every official who arrived in Behmai was forced to listen to grievances. During his visit, the Minister of State, Shivnath Kushwaha, had trouble getting through, for the residents poured onto the main roads and held up traffic for hours

while they demanded the presence of the Chief Minister. Again, it was a call for better police protection. There was not a politician who was not aware that the Behmai *sanghar* was the worst dacoit killing in modern Indian history. Previously, the biggest massacre had been the gunning down of sixteen villagers by Girwar Singh in 1966. This dacoit leader had taken revenge on villagers suspected of giving shelter to a rival gang or of being police informers.

'How many men are posted in this region now?' Kushwaha asked senior police officers.

He was told that 2,000 police were already searching in the ravines, and that another 500 were to join them. The search force had been equipped with walkie-talkies and the most sophisticated weapons available and no stone, no bush, would be left unturned. It could be only a few days before Dasyu Sundari, the Bandit Beauty, was run to ground.

'The reign of the dacoits is seriously threatened,' Vinod Jain told Kushwaha. 'On the same day that this terrible thing happened at Behmai, police shot down Matadeen Chand, a member of the Jagram gang.'

'Don't give me that!' snapped Mr Kushwaha. 'I am not interested in one man. I want this whole Phoolan Devi gang!'

But everybody had his problems. Khursheed Ahmed, in charge of anti-dacoity operations for the district, complained that the lack of a helicopter was hampering the hunt. 'Who can I turn to?' he asked a junior officer. 'I have been pleading for a chopper for months but nobody wants to listen.'

Mr Singhal, who was in charge of field operations, set up camp in the ravines and maintained contact with Ahmed in Kalpi. He sent men out with enough food to last them for days, instructing them to observe the 'three C's' — co-ordination, co-operation and courage. In the cities, English-speaking cynics stated that the three C's would stand better for corruption, callousness and chaos. The inter-caste rivalries, inter-station jealousies and inter-district competition were well known outside the police force. Many had no faith the police would catch Phoolan Devi.

Despite the intensity of the operation to run the Bandit

Queen to ground, the whole thing got off to an embarrassing start because of over-enthusiasm within police ranks. On the strength of a rumour that Phoolan Devi had run from the ravines immediately after the massacre and made her way to Lucknow to relax at a cinema, every picture-house in the city was surrounded and no-one was allowed to leave without being thoroughly screened by police. One of the major problems was that the authorities did not possess a photograph of the woman bandit, and although a composite had been made up from descriptions given by villagers, it bore little resemblance to her. Nevertheless, police felt they had enough to go on and now as they looked at the cinema audiences they suddenly spotted her! Dressed in a peasant woman's clothing, the suspect was yanked out from the mass of cinema-goers and, under intense security, raced off to police headquarters. One officer thought there was something odd about this woman and when she was asked to undress she was found be a local transvestite who got her kicks in going to the pictures dressed in drag and sitting among the male audience.

Police were further embarrassed when a messenger delivered a letter to the Sikandara police station, written on behalf of Phoolan Devi. It bore a crude letterhead, a rubber stamp reading Dasyu Sundari. Referring to Sriram and Lalaram Singh, it said: 'If you continue to give shelter, we will make life hell for you by creating terror in your area. Your mothers will be kidnapped and given to my men. When they have finished with them, they will need medical treatment.'

The red-faced authorities found some consolation in the pages of the esteemed national newspaper, *The Statesman*, which wrote in an editorial: 'If Phoolan is liquidated it will perhaps be the finest feather in the cap of the UP police.' The newspaper referred to the Behmai incident as 'an insensate orgy of killing' and went on: 'Phoolan cannot claim any mitigating factor. She is as cruel as anyone can be. But crime finally does not pay and if the police decision to liquidate her, albeit taken hesitatingly (chivalry still persists), succeeds,

she will be a forgotten name. Her nemesis is around the corner. If not today, perhaps tomorrow.' Another national paper remarked: 'While the massacre has made the top brass sit up and initiate steps to strengthen the security arrangements, the fact remains that terror continues to grip villagers of Behmai and neighbouring areas who have been victims of depredations by outlaws for a long time.'

Demonstrations were held outside the Sikandara police station; students, joined by lawyers and other professional people, marched through the streets and accusation and counter-accusation were made in the Uttar Pradesh Parliament. 'The most incredible part of the tragedy,' a journalist wrote, 'is the criminal apathy of the personnel of the PAC camp at Khojarampur. A youth had informed the *jawans* who were then playing volleyball about the arrival of Phoolan Devi's gang. There were 50 *jawans* in the camp. But they simply ignored his pleadings ...'

If relations between police and villagers were cool before Behmai, they were now frozen. Uma Shankar Vajpayee, superintendent of police in the Jalaun district, which included Phoolan Devi's village, realised how bad things were when, shortly after taking up his new job, he visited a village in full uniform and initially received a warm reception. However, when the residents discovered he was the new superintendent they turned their backs on him and walked away. He found out later that he bore a strong resemblance to the dacoit leader Mustaqim.

At his camp in the ravines, Singhal, in charge of field operations, had arranged that six motor boats be made available for his men to patrol the Yamuna River. A consignment of semi-automatic rifles was also sent down from Delhi for issue to the police groups. From the Behmai villagers he learned that Phoolan's gang — if they were still together — possessed a sten gun, two self-loading rifles, a semi-automatic rifle, four rifles and twelve single-bore shotguns, plus a large number of hand guns. Now, as he lay back in his tent, he wondered whether the gang would really be caught quickly. February was drawing to a close. By not

catching the dacoits immediately, the police had lessened their chances. For the gang had had the opportunity to split up and lose themselves in the villages, where they would find help from others of the same caste. Singhal slapped at a mosquito and sighed. It was bloody hard work scrabbling through these ravines, returning to write reports, sending messages back over the radio. And it was a thankless task. Headquarters didn't want to hear anything but positive results. He knew, of course, that headquarters were in the firing line, too. So were the politicians. Everyone in authority was getting it from everyone else in authority. He picked up a newspaper that had been brought in that morning. It was several days old but it was recent enough to tell him about the furore in Parliament. The State Government was being pulverised for its failure to prevent the Behmai carnage. Several members of the Bidhan Parishad demanded the government's resignation for 'failing to protect the lives and property of the people and maintain law and order'. Opposition members were also demanding the disbandment of the PAC which had become only 'an instrument of oppression of the innocent and the weak, and developed cold feet when facing dacoits who went on rampages creating a reign of terror'. Chief Minister Vishwanath Singh had given a public assurance, Singhal read, that stern action would be taken against those found guilty of negligence when dealing with the massacre. The entire police force, the Chief Minister had said, should not be assailed as it had many achievements to its credit. The lives of many brave *jawans* had been lost in encounters with dacoits.

Singhal dropped the paper beside his camp bed, turned out the lamp and closed his eyes. No matter what kind of day the politicians had, he thought, they always went home at the end of it and went to sleep in comfort.

The following day a number of Singhal's men were almost wiped out — by another police party. Closing in on a gang, one group of police officers was fired upon by another who thought they were dacoits dressed as police. They should all have had binoculars, fumed Singhal, as he headed back to

Kalpi from the ravines to set up more permanent headquarters in the government guest house.

He had also had problems with the helicopter which the government had sanctioned for anti-dacoity operations. It was stationed miles away, at Lucknow, and even in an emergency he had found it could not be put to immediate use. The problem was that civil aviation laws required that helicopters must take off and land at specified helipads. The one time the helicopter had been used recently in violation of the rules, when police thought they had a gang pinpointed at Churkhi, the pilot, Shekhar Singh, was grounded.

'At least the reward money on Phoolan's head will make our men enthusiastic,' one of Singhal's colleagues said. Singhal shook his head sadly. 'Increasing the reward doesn't help. It only encourages dacoity. It becomes a dacoit's ambition to brag about the price on his head. If they put a flat rate of 500 rupees for the arrest of every outlaw, big or small, that would dent their egos.'

There were so many problems, so many things that went wrong or could go wrong because of lack of equipment or red tape, that hunting the Phoolan Devi gang was an impossible mission, thought Singhal. Fighting dacoits was worse than fighting a guerilla war, when at least you could fire at will. On an official anti-dacoity operation every bullet and firearm had to be accounted for.

Singhal had his own ideas for fighting the dacoity menace. 'What we should do,' he told a colleague, 'is enact a law that would enable the police to arrest close relatives of the wanted men and women. Just think — how much of the money they make from kidnappings can they spend on themselves? These dacoits are always on the run from ravine to ravine and all they spend their money on is weapons. They get their food and clothes from the villages. The rest of the money, I am sure, goes to relatives. If people think that a law in which relatives are arrested is unjust, it should be remembered that laws are reversible; murders by these dacoits are not.'

Phoolan Devi's family were, of course, thoroughly grilled by police. How had she arranged those two warning shots

after the massacre? Her parents, despite the forcible questioning by over-zealous officers, pleaded ignorance. Her sister Ramkali looked at the police with scorn when they asked why Phoolan had become a dacoit.

'God turns men into saints,' she said. 'But it is men who turn women into dacoits.'

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

MUSTAQIM was furious. 'Do you realise what you have done?' he screamed at the woman who now called herself the Bandit Queen. 'You have put the whole police force on our trail! The ravines are crawling with police. They are pulling in gangs and shooting down dacoits in every valley because of you!'

'They asked for it,' she said sullenly.

'But *I* didn't!' shouted Mustaqim. 'Consider that, until the police withdraw, you and I are finished. There will be no more dacoities in which Mustaqim is associated with Phoolan Devi!'

'You are like a frightened man,' she taunted.

He stepped up close to her. 'I don't want to end up like Vikram Mallah. You are a bad omen, Phoolan Devi.'

The gangs of Ram Avtar, Mustaqim, Balwan Singh, Man Singh and Phoolan Devi had been travelling separately for up to twelve miles a day, making their presence known in one village and then moving far from it, to confuse police. These tactics were suggested by Balwan Singh, whom everyone suspected of being an ex-army man. Now the gangs had regrouped in the ravines and Mustaqim, coming face to face with Phoolan Devi again, was unleashing all his anger on her. She had gone too far. A few deaths were acceptable during a dacoity because almost always someone tried to run for help and had to be shot down. Or the dacoits' lives were threatened by a villager producing a gun. But to line them up and shoot them down! Was she insane? Had she not

considered the repercussions? Malkhan Singh, the 'God-father' of the gangs, was angry with her too, said Mustaqim.

'It is fortunate for you, Phoolan Devi, that he is not in this district, because he would give you the thrashing of your life! I should do it myself, but I do not strike women.'

Balwan Singh interrupted the exchange. It was dangerous for them all to be grouped together like this. If the police surrounded them, four of the biggest gangs in Bundelkhand and the Chambal Valley would be eliminated.

'How do you suggest we operate, Balwan Singh?' asked Mustaqim.

'We break up. We break up into twos and threes. We melt into the villages. That way the police will never find us. And then, when they return to the towns and cities, we regroup.' He turned to Phoolan Devi, who was sitting on her haunches chewing betel nut. She and his woman, Meera Thakur, should dress as women labourers and work at a brick kiln he knew about. The police would not think of searching there. There was the added advantage that they did not know what the two women looked like — Balwan Singh had seen the composite picture the police possessed and it was nothing like Phoolan.

The gang members began to take their leave. Man Singh, wondering how his sister was faring, asked Mustaqim whether he had seen her lately.

'I have not had time for women, Man Singh. After what Phoolan did at Behmai, I have even less time for them. Why don't you leave her? She is bad luck.'

Man Singh flicked back his long hair. 'I cannot leave her, Mustaqim. She is like a wife to me. But yes, we shall break up for a short time. She will go with Meera Thakur while I take to the ravines. Where will you go?'

'A long way from here. I shall go and see my cousin, Imamuddin, and we will go to Bombay and disappear among the crowds.'

'Bombay! Isn't it risky, travelling that far?'

'It will be safer there than in these valleys!'

Ten days had passed since the massacre and now, as

Phoolan settled down under canvas with Man Singh for one final night before their temporary separation, she felt no remorse for what had happened. She had had to take her revenge for the acts of Lalaram and Sriram; it was as simple as that. And she felt powerful. Men had pleaded with her, feared her, as she had pleaded with and feared them. She was the Bandit Queen, and the *baghis* acknowledged that whenever they shouted her name.

Balwan Singh set off for the south, accompanied by seven men. Their number, he felt, was still too large but they wanted to get supplies from a 'safe' village before breaking up. They entered Behta village and decided to rest for a time, which proved to be a fatal mistake. An informer, anxious for some reward money, sneaked out and alerted the authorities. But as the police contingent approached, a dacoit sympathiser warned Balwan Singh. The gang managed several shots at the constabulary before taking to the ravines with the police hot on their heels.

The chase lasted all day, covering 22 miles of rugged terrain. At the Betwa River, which meets the Yamuna at Hamirpur, some of the dacoits ran into a quarry while three took up positions and waited for the policemen. As the officers came into view the bandits fired, hitting Inspector Moolchand in the leg. Another officer, Sub-Inspector Udenia, dived for cover, pulling Moolchand with him. A group of armed police approached from another direction and, seeing the two crouching behind a mound, believed them to be *baghis* and readied their weapons. Moolchand and Udenia threw up their hands, shouting that they were police. But the others, thinking this to be a trick, opened fire and Moolchand was hit again, this time by his own men. The dacoits, who were much closer to Moolchand and Udenia, crawled up to Moolchand, grabbed his rifle and put a bullet in his head, while Udenia fled. Realising their terrible mistake, the armed police threw grenades at the dacoits and killed six of them, including Balwan Singh who was, in fact, dressed in a police superintendent's uniform.

The officer's death was overlooked as an occupational

hazard. Senior officials were more delighted that a breakthrough had been achieved. Anti-dacoity operations were intensified and bandits who were nowhere near Behmai at the time of the massacre were shot down or arrested. Among the 'catches' was the gang leader Vidyaram, responsible for over 50 cases of murder and kidnapping. On the wanted list for years, with a reputation for being one of the cruellest dacoits to roam the valleys, he was shot dead in an encounter. In January 1980 he had lined up ten villagers in the Lucknow district and had mercilessly shot them. There was also an incident when he threw two small boys into the air and bayoneted them as they fell. Once, he had gunned down a villager he believed to be an informer and hanged him naked from a tree as an example.

Police interviewed kidnap victims of Phoolan's gang, trying to build up a picture of her movements, and, most importantly, what she looked like. The cousin of an Orai bank official told police that during the three days he was in the gang's hands he decided Phoolan Devi was extremely cunning. She avoided spending the night in any village. She loved nuts, was a fine marksman, and ran like a deer. The victim said he was treated well by the gang, being given six *chapattis* a day to eat, but remained under constant guard. The watch was changed every hour and while he slept with the main group Phoolan and her lover slept away from the others. She dominated Man Singh, he said. He described her as having a wheatish complexion, a longish face and bobbed hair. He gained the impression she was not very healthy. She was fond of tying red ribbons as a headband and wristband and often wore black clothes. He believed he had been lucky to escape. The gang told him that Phoolan Devi tantalised captives with her nakedness and, after a night of passion, shot them dead at sunrise.

Meanwhile, Mustaqim shaved off his beard and changed the shape of his moustache. He had heard about Balwan Singh's death and there were rumours that another gang of nine *baghis* had been mown down. There was little doubt in his mind that Bombay was the place to head for.

Among the dacoits lucky enough to be arrested and not shot was Ramkesh, a member of Mustaqim's gang. Pulled in for interrogation at Kalpi police station, he finally broke under pressure and told the authorities how the gangs had split up for a time. Some were going to return home to relatives, others to keep a low profile in the valleys. Deputy Inspector-General Vinod Jain therefore put out an alert for all station officers to keep a special watch on the homes of relatives of dacoits. Individuals coming from and going to the villages should be questioned closely.

Early in the morning on March 4 a bus pulled into the village of Galuapur in the Kanpur district. It carried the usual party of farmers and women travelling to visit relatives. Among them were two men dressed in the loose white clothing of the region and no-one took the slightest bit of notice of them as they stepped from the bus and called at the local store to buy betel nut. They sat outside the store for some fifteen minutes before setting out on the dusty path leading to the village of Dastampur, the younger of the two carrying a bag on his shoulder. As they walked along, a sub-inspector and a constable rode towards them on bicycles. Sub-Inspector Hariram Pal and Constable Hari Singh had only that morning been alerted by Deputy Inspector-General Jain to question anyone walking between the villages. As the two parties neared each other, the police noticed that the man with the bag appeared agitated. Next, he left the path and started walking away. Sub-Inspector Pal called him back and asked who they were. Neither replied.

'Open the bag!' commanded the superior officer.

As it was zipped open, the policemen spotted a revolver. Suddenly, the older man made a grab at the weapon but Sub-Inspector Pal was quick enough to grasp his wrist. A fierce struggle broke out between the four men, during which the revolver fell and landed on a rock, breaking the trigger. As they continued to fight, Pal shouted for help from the villagers who had gathered around to watch, but not one put a foot forward to assist the police. Then a group of college boys, hearing the police shouts, ran up and pounced on the two men.

'Who are you? Who are you?' demanded Sub-Inspector Pal as the two strangers lay bleeding and gasping under the weight of the students.

Finally the elder man said, 'You want to know who I am? I am Baba Mustaqim!'

Mustaqim! The dreaded dacoit! Some of the students immediately ran off, but Mustaqim and his companion, his cousin Imamuddin, were too weak to struggle any more. Pal immediately ordered some of the villagers to run to the police station at Derapur and bring back reinforcements, and this time there was a response from the watchers. While the police waited, their captives were bound with rope.

Mustaqim, after trudging through the ravines virtually non-stop for the past three days, had made a terrible mistake. He was planning to visit his brother in Dastampur to give him money to keep his family going while he was in Bombay. Instead of keeping to the 'back tracks', he had listened to his cousin's pleadings that they take the bus to Galuapur. That meant they had to use the main path between Galuapur and Dastampur.

'So what do you intend to do with me?' Mustaqim asked his captors. His reply was a kick in the face.

Before long, four constables arrived in a van from Derapur police station. All carried rifles. As if he feared the worst, Mustaqim said, 'Kill me if you must, but spare my cousin. He is not a dacoit.'

Imamuddin was terrified. He lay with his face in the dirt, sobbing.

'No-one will be killed,' said Sub-Inspector Pal.

'I cannot believe that,' said Mustaqim. 'I have money on me that I want to distribute to the poor. As these villagers are my witnesses, I entrust the money to you.'

Mustaqim was rolled over onto his stomach and searched. One of the constables pulled out a bundle of 100-rupee notes. The sub-inspector put the money into his pocket and then began removing four rings from Mustaqim's fingers, his watch and a chain. The dacoit leader twisted his head and kissed the amulet which he wore around his neck and which was now

lying on the ground near his face. It was suddenly ripped from him.

'I ask you again to spare the life of my cousin,' said Mustaqim, but this time the sub-inspector ignored him. Instead, he instructed his men to throw the dacoits into the back of the van. They landed heavily and the villagers heard Imamuddin cry out in pain. The witnesses saw the van take the road to Derapur. A few minutes later, shots were heard. Villagers ran to a spot near a bridge where the van had stopped. The bodies of Mustaqim and his cousin lay in the road, riddled with bullets.

'I saw what happened,' said a man who had been in the fields. 'They dragged Mustaqim from the car and fired a twelve-bore shotgun at him and then the other constables fired into the body. Afterwards, they did the same to the other man.'

Police later issued their official version, saying that on the morning of March 4 two groups of policemen were returning from duty when they spotted two men. On seeing the police, they started running and were challenged to stop. The men turned on the police and fired, so the police returned the fire and killed both of them. It was only afterwards, said the official version, that they learned one of the dead men was Baba Mustaqim, while the other remained unidentified. The elimination of Mustaqim, police said, was the result of the sheer determination of Vinod Jain, who had travelled about with police patrols, eating at their messes and in general boosting their morale. Mustaqim's death meant the end of a man who during the last 14 months had committed two murders, ten armed robberies and kidnapped 22 people. There had been more than 20 encounters with him during which a sub-inspector, Swami Din, was killed and a PAC constable, Vishnu, hit by bullets.

Announcing Mustaqim's death, the new Inspector-General of police, Mr N. K. Verma, added that police were 'hot on the trail' of Phoolan Devi. Asked whether she was in the police net already, Verma replied, 'One may take the liberty of saying so.'

Mr Verma would not give his reasons for making that statement, because he was working on a hunch. He believed the big-name dacoits who had been associated with Mustaqim would go to his village and offer condolences to his family, for it was a principle among bandits to honour their dead compatriots if at all practicable. One dacoit, a former athlete who had represented India in the 1958 Tokyo Asian Games, had risked his life to carry the body of his dead brother through the ravines so that it could be properly cremated. The story of Pan Singh Tomar, who turned from winning gold to looting gold, is one of the strangest to emerge from the tangled topography of central India. Raised in the Morena district of Madhya Pradesh, Pan Singh joined the army where he excelled in sports. After taking part in the Asian Games he set the national record in the 3000 m steeplechase in 1960 with a time of 8 minutes 53.4 seconds, a run not bettered until ten years later by another competitor in the Asian Games. He was a tall, long-striding runner who travelled abroad many times for competitions. When he left the army in 1971, Pan Singh Tomar returned to his village to help his brother on his farm. But he walked in on a land dispute between his brother and a rich and powerful relative. It went on for eight years until the relative, Babu Singh, set a gang of toughs onto Pan Singh and insulted his daughter. Remaining calm, Pan Singh went to the police but while they were noting the complaint Babu Singh arrived and said Pan Singh's charges were baseless. Instead, Babu Singh issued a complaint against Pan Singh and the police registered it. Pan Singh decided that he had been pushed around enough and that he would take his revenge.

A day later he shot at and wounded Babu Singh's nephew, Jagannath Singh. Then, accompanied by his brother Matadin, he fled to the ravines. Believing now that his arch-enemy was gone for good, Babu Singh relaxed his guard, and two days later Pan Singh ambushed him and killed him. A year passed. On September 20, 1980, Babu Singh's sons, Jarnail and Havildar, were working in their fields when Pan Singh and Matadin appeared from behind a boulder. Before

they could shout for help, the sons were shot dead. Two months later, a joint patrol of the Gwalior and Morena police ambushed Pan Singh and his brother. Matadin was fatally wounded. Displaying courage that won the respect of dacoits throughout the Chambal Valley, Pan Singh picked up his dying brother and ran off, leaving his pursuers far behind. He was determined that his brother would be given a proper cremation and not end up in a police mortuary or eaten by jackals and vultures. Still carrying the body, Pan Singh crossed over the border into Rajasthan, where Matadin was cremated. After the ceremony, Pan Singh formed an alliance with another dacoit in the state, Sarnam Singh. They exchanged turbans and vowed they would serve one another to the death.

Inspector-General Verma's belief that Phoolan Devi and other dacoits would consider offering their personal condolences to Mustaqim's family was well judged. Working in the brick kiln by day, sleeping in a nearby friendly village at night, Phoolan, despite her run-in with Mustaqim, felt that she, as the Bandit Queen, should pay her respects to his relatives. The news of his death had been brought to her by a villager and she immediately sent word to Man Singh, who was sheltering in the ravines a few miles away. Although nearly three weeks had passed since his death, Phoolan was told there was still time to pay her respects — the Muslim period for mourning continued for 40 days. And she was tired of working in the kiln.

The owner, a Sudra, knew who she was and she was confident he would not give her away. But she was aware of the dangers of remaining in one place for long. The police had been to the village three times and had carried out a systematic search of the houses. They had been to the kiln but had not checked the faces of the workers. They had seen her from a distance but the patrol had thought it unlikely that Phoolan Devi would be carting bricks around on her head. And besides, they still did not know what she really looked like.

Over the next few days, other members of Phoolan's gang

came to the village. If she and Man Singh were going to Gulauli, they had decided, they would go, too. For they all had their self-respect — they would not want it known that they had turned their backs on the spirit of Baba Mustaqim. The risks, though, were enormous. The gang decided to pay their respects in groups and would stay not only in Gulauli but in the nearby village of Sirauli.

One man who wanted to be in on the capture or elimination of Phoolan Devi if she went to Gulauli was none other than Sub-Inspector Dhruv Lal Yadav, who had been so close to coming face to face with the joint gangs on the night after the Behmai massacre. He agreed with Inspector-General Verma that the possibility of Phoolan trying to go to Gulauli was high. He called in his informers and at a discreet rendezvous — for no informer would walk directly into a police station — asked what they knew about the movements of the Phoolan gang. They all shared the same opinion: the Bandit Queen would be going to Gulauli. Sub-Inspector Yadav put much weight on what his spies told him. He had carefully built up a network of reliable contacts.

Naturally, the incentive for such informers is personal gain. These contacts are found among the highest and the lowest circles of village life. At the top are the village *panchas* and other influential people who, despite their positions and relative wealth, have difficulty in obtaining licences for guns to protect themselves. Government policy is not to hand out licences to all and sundry, and that goes for village officials. There is, however, an easy back door — a regular supply of information about dacoits in exchange for an official signature on a firearms licence application. Known harbourers of dacoits are, of course, a splendid source of information, providing they can be made to talk. This is achieved by torturing them or by offering rewards too good to refuse. Victims of gangs are also able to help police as a form of personal revenge — having had some association with a dacoit group, either willingly or unwillingly, they sometimes know enough to put police on a good trail. There are also the casual dacoits who indulge in occasional robberies with a

small-time gang and then attempt to avoid prosecution by offering information about other gangs. Informers, though, whoever they might be, do little to improve the public image of the police and accusations of corruption are rife. Some officers, in a private trade of information, have asked for more: half an hour with the informer's sister or perhaps a payment *from* the informer under threat of being charged. Some officers have made their fortunes by abusing the very laws they have been appointed to protect. Finding that a tip-off from an informer has proved worthless, officers have been known to arrest innocent people in order not to lose face and to show the 'efficiency' of their investigations.

However, Sub-Inspector Yadav was proud of his reputation. Yes, he had his informers but he was careful not to abuse the relationship. Now, on the basis of what he had been told, he set into motion a big operation which he hoped would result in the capture of Phoolan Devi. He sent a number of men on undercover missions, dressing them as villagers and travellers and deploying them on roads and tracks around Gulauli. Simply by listening in on village conversations they learned that some of the gang would be staying at Sirauli while three others would be resting in Gulauli itself for a few days. As for Phoolan Devi and Man Singh, their intentions were not known, but there was little doubt in anyone's mind that the couple would turn up.

But it was not the police alone who were interested in establishing the whereabouts of the Bandit Queen. Running with Malkhan Singh, the Godfather of the Chambal Valley dacoits, was a former police informer, Sobaran Singh. A police officer verbally insulted him one day and Sobaran Singh grinned and pretended to accept the abuse. But he took his revenge by stealing a gun and going off into the ravines. There he managed to ingratiate himself into Malkhan's gang, although at first he was treated with great suspicion. However, he was able to supply the gang with much information about police numbers and movements and was eventually considered to be a valuable asset.

Sobaran Singh respected his leader. He saw him as an

efficient planner; ruthless when necessary, yet a man of compassion. The only story Sobaran Singh had not enjoyed hearing about his chief was how he had allowed a police officer to go free after capture, for Sobaran had a great dislike of officials after the disrespect he had been shown. The lone officer had stumbled across Malkhan's gang and, fearing the worst, he asked Malkhan to put a bullet through his chest and not his back — that way it would appear that he had not fled in the face of danger. Malkhan had laughed at the suggestion and personally escorted the constable to the main road, bent and touched his feet in respect and gave him 100 rupees to buy something for his family. Sobaran Singh knew that he would have had no hesitation in gunning the policeman down, but if that was the way of Malkhan Singh, whom he regarded almost as an elder brother, then so be it.

The Behmai massacres had seriously jeopardised Malkhan's movements. It was his policy not to kill or loot, for he preferred to make his money by kidnapping the offspring of moneylenders, goldsmiths or those dealing in stolen property. He gave money to the needy at times of marriage and other village functions and he also financed religious festivals and the building of temples. He never misbehaved with women; nor did he allow anyone in his gang to do so. If there were to be any thoughts of revenge among his gang for a wrong done to them, he insisted on knowing about the problem and if he felt vengeance was justified, would devise suitable punishment. He was angry with Phoolan Devi, but she had not acted against him — she had just made things very awkward.

Sobaran Singh, who was becoming increasingly nervous about the intense police patrolling, wanted to suggest that the gang eliminate Phoolan Devi. Then the police would pull out of the ravines. But he knew Malkhan would never agree to that, as no personal vendetta was involved. So he decided to kill the Bandit Queen himself. Malkhan would be mad at him at first, no doubt, but there would be no question of punishment — that would only have arisen if Phoolan had been a relative or a close friend of Malkhan's and Sobaran knew she was neither of those.

So, armed with a US-made Winchester rifle, Sobaran Singh made his way to Gulauli village, ostensibly to pay his personal respects to Mustaqim's family. The gun, he explained, was for his own protection. But explanations were not necessary; he was accepted virtually without question when he said he was a member of Malkhan's gang and was able to name several lieutenants. Mustaqim had once been in Malkhan's gang before forming his own and his kidnapping techniques had been gleaned from his years with Malkhan.

After paying his respects, Sobaran was told it would be safer to rest up in Sirauli village. He made his way there and was led to the home of a young Muslim called Matadeen, the brother of Ram Shankar, one of Phoolan's gang. The house had been set aside for visiting gang members and Sobaran Singh could not believe his luck. He was actually going to be put up in the very house where Phoolan's gang were staying! Could it mean that the Bandit Queen herself would stay there, too? There would be plenty of opportunity to kill her and the other gang members and then escape into the night.

Late in the afternoon of March 30, Sub-Inspector Yadav learned that IR40 was believed to be in, or near, Gulauli or Sirauli. IR40 — Inter-range 40 — was the codename in Uttar Pradesh for Phoolan's gang. It was time to move in. Accompanied by a party of fifteen officers trained in commando tactics, and armed with light machine-guns, rifles and hand grenades, Yadav travelled to Sirauli the following day, arriving at noon. As his men leaped from their two jeeps, Yadav noted the nod of a village informer who was sitting at a pre-arranged spot. Further down the village another informer indicated a house. The police officers spread out around it. There were to be no mistakes, Sub-Inspector Yadav had said.

Inside, Sobaran Singh was eating *dhal* and *chapattis* with two of Phoolan's men, Laltu and Ram Shankar. Sobaran Sing found that he and Laltu shared a common hatred for the police. Laltu used to wash their uniforms until he had been insulted. He had stolen an armful of uniforms and run off to the ravines where he had handed them out among the dacoits. They laughed and chatted about how they would love to gun

down their enemies in authority: Laltu grinned and said Sobaran Singh had better be careful with his gun because he, Laltu, was wearing a police uniform. He could not have known that had Phoolan been there, Sobaran Singh would not have hesitated in turning his rifle on all of them.

Ram Shankar, who had had his hair cropped only that morning, sat quietly listening to the conversation, occasionally flicking loose hairs from his white shirt. They had been in the village for 24 hours and Ram Shankar thought it was time to leave. But Laltu was enjoying the comforts of a roof over his head and insisted on staying for one more night. After all, he pointed out, Phoolan would not be arriving until the next day. So, the Bandit Queen will be here in 24 hours, thought Sobaran Singh. He broke off another piece of *chapatti* and pushed it into his mouth.

He never got to chew it. The door was kicked in and the room was peppered with bullets. Ram Shankar got a hand to his Indian-made rifle before bullets ripped into his heart, but Laltu was dead before he realised what was happening.

Delighted that the information had proved reliable so far, Yadav radioed the Superintendent of Police at Jalaun, Uma Shankar Bajpai. Sirauli had been thoroughly searched, said Yadav. The informers did not believe Phoolan was in the village and his men had not found her. That meant she had to be at Gulauli. There was no means of sending a warning to her, said Yadav — his men had completely sealed the road from Sirauli.

Superintendent Bajpai was elated. It seemed that Phoolan Devi's reign of terror was about to end.

Gulauli is one of the larger villages in the bandit-roaming grounds, supporting a population of 11,000, most of whom are Muslims. There are a few dozen backward caste Hindu families, Lohars and Yadavs, but only a handful of Mallahs. Because of the respect that gangs operating in the Jalaun and Kanpur districts held for Baba Mustaqim and his powerful associate Malkhan, Gulauli at the time had the rare distinction of being a protected village. It had been attacked only once by a dacoit called Shivnarain, four years before in

1977, who had fallen out with Mustaqim and wanted his revenge.

Taking personal charge of the Gulauli operation, Superintendent Bajpai rounded up 250 police officers, many of them trained in anti-dacoity operations. The unofficial policy of these officers was to shoot first and take statements afterwards. Information from the informers suggested that if Phoolan was hiding anywhere in Gulauli it would be in the home of Nyamat Bora, a former friend of Mustaqim. It was a professional operation. Bajpai's men had Gulauli surrounded before word spread through the village that the police were there. If Phoolan was in the village, thought Superintendent Bajpai, it was impossible for her to escape through the net he had cast. Again, police intelligence had been accurate — to an extent.

Inside Nyamat Bora's house, three members of Phoolan's gang, Prahlad Yadav, Baladin and Prem Singh, were taking a nap. But they were alone; and they were hot and bored. How they wished they could sleep outside in the shade, instead of being sealed in this room. But they had had specific instructions from Phoolan Devi and Man Singh to move outside only in the evening, and then only to call at Mustaqim's house.

Suddenly, the door burst open. A villager cried, 'Police! We are surrounded! They are coming down the street!'

There was no other way out and Baladin, who had felt uncomfortable about the lack of another exit, started for the door. But the villager said, 'No! They will see you.'

'Lock us in, then,' snapped Baladin. The padlock was on the outside. He hoped the police would think that there could be no dacoits inside because they would not have been able to lock themselves in.

Slamming and locking the door, the villager made off. At the end of the street Superintendent Bajpai watched him through his binoculars. It was most interesting, he thought, that the very house they were interested in should have suddenly had its front door locked. Taking no chances, Bajpai led 24 officers towards the house, darting from building to

building. It was just after four in the afternoon. Tonight he hoped he could sleep soundly on the knowledge of a job well done. When the house was surrounded, two of his men ran to the door and shot away the padlock. Then Superintendent Bajpai instructed anyone inside to come out with hands raised. Five minutes passed.

Bajpai was a great believer in leading from the front. So now, finding no response from within the house, he dodged around the side and clambered onto the mud roof. Using a crowbar, he smashed a hole in the roof, sending cakes of earth on the hiding dacoits. Suddenly, a gun exploded inside and Superintendent Bajpai jumped back as a bullet ripped through the thin roof. They had had their chance.

'In!' he yelled to his men. 'But I want them alive!'

The dacoits were waiting for such an order. As the police charged in, four policemen, Sub-Inspector Ramayan Singh, Sub-Inspector Surendra Pal Singh, Sub-Inspector Ram Bharose and Constable Ranjit Singh, were hit, although not fatally. The second wave of police did not make the same mistake and picked off Prahlad Yadav and Prem Singh. Baladin dropped his rifle and screamed to be spared. He was ordered to come out with his hands raised.

'Do not fire! Do not fire!' Bajpai ordered.

Baladin emerged, blinking in the afternoon light.

'Who else is in there?' asked Bajpai.

'No-one.'

'Where is Phoolan Devi?'

'She isn't here.'

Bajpai instructed his men to search the house. They dragged out the bodies of Prahlad Yadav and Prem Singh. The officers shook their heads. No Phoolan Devi. No Man Singh. Bajpai cursed. He took Baladin around to the rear of the house and into the courtyard, away from the confusion created by the gathering villagers.

'Where,' he asked again, 'is Phoolan Devi?'

'She was here earlier in the day. She came to pay her respects and then she left.'

'Which house was she staying in?'

'I do not know.'

Bajpai sighed. He told Baladin he could lower his arms. The man obviously had no weapon.

'I want to ask you where Phoolan is likely to go in the ravines.'

Baladin shrugged. His eyes darted from Bajpai to the guards. After the gun battle and seeing Baladin unarmed they were beginning to relax. He measured the distance to the exit — and then darted for it, taking everyone by surprise. One of the constables fired a burst from his light machine-gun, but Baladin had vanished around a corner of the house. A quick search failed to find him. But Bajai knew he could not get out of the village: his men were posted all around it. The superintendent was now aware he had only one option left and that was to search every house in the village, even if it took all night. Not a single inhabitant would escape being screened.

In a hut close to the village edge, Phoolan Devi lay under a pile of old clothes and cardboard boxes with Man Singh. Both had rifles at their sides and they were aimed at the doorway. She realised she was close to capture, but had vowed never to be taken alive by the Uttar Pradesh police. Dressed in a sari, she had arrived in the village alone earlier that morning. Man Singh was already there, having paid his respects to Mustaqim's relatives. She was then taken to the house of a local farmer, Harar Kassain, where she intended to stay overnight with Man Singh. Although the police had swept in quickly and efficiently, a group of boys ran to Kassain's home and raised the alarm. Phoolan and Man Singh had been asleep.

'They will find you here,' said Kassain. 'But I have another place. Hurry!'

He led them through a side door, across an alley and into the dilapidated hut. When they lay down, he threw rags and boxes over them and returned to his home. They remained silent until they heard the gunfire. Then Man Singh asked if she was frightened.

'Those pigs, yes, of course they frighten me. When they

find us they will show no mercy. Will you fight them with me?'

'Until the end. Because if they find us, the end will come anyway.'

They knew from the exchange of gunfire that their associates were dead or injured. When police and dacoits fired at each other, someone always got hurt — and today there were many more police than dacoits. Through gaps in the clothing and the broken wall of the hut, they could see that it was getting dark. If they were not discovered and it felt safe, they would try to make a break for it under cover of darkness. Now they could hear voices, shouts of protest by the villagers as they were ordered out of nearby homes.

Superintendent Bajpai was doing a thorough job. Not one house was missed. Every room was carefully probed. Villagers were pushed around, some beaten in the hope of extracting information. Bajpai realised that among these residents at least a dozen or more harboured *baghis*. They were so well practised at it that it was impossible to pick them out from among the others. Often these people were regarded as law-abiding citizens and mixed freely with district officers. Usually, because of their association with dacoits, they were feared by their neighbours. As a result, they were able to carry out small crimes themselves — smuggling, disposing of stolen property — because no-one dared report them to the police. Although some harbourers were forced by decoits to give shelter, almost all performed the task simply for personal gain.

The police threw open the door of Harar Kassain's home and ordered him and his family into the street. They were examined by torchlight and asked their names. His children burst into tears. Harar Kassain shook his head when he was asked the whereabouts of Phoolan Devi. His heart was pounding and he hoped his face showed no fear. Unlike some harbourers, Harar Kassain had no arrangement with the authorities. Some residents who gave 'protection' to dacoits also fed the police with information about the gangs: not enough to lead to their capture, but enough to make the police

happy to give them favours. Kassain, like his neighbours, was pushed and threatened with jail if he withheld any information but he insisted he knew nothing of the whereabouts of Phoolan Devi. The reward on her head was substantial, he knew, but it would not be worth his life to give her away. Word would spread that he had informed and within twenty-four hours he would be dead. Kassain was in a bind. He had not known Phoolan, but a year earlier Mustaqim had appointed him as guardian of visiting dacoits and now, even after Mustaqim's death, he was urged by Mustaqim's village associates to continue the service. After questioning him for fifteen minutes about his work, his habits and his friends, the anti-dacoity squad pushed Kassain away towards the other villagers, who had not been allowed to re-enter their homes.

In the hut, Phoolan and Man Singh knew the police were very close. They could hear doors banging and sometimes a woman squealed. Suddenly, the door of the hut was kicked in and it crashed to the floor just a few feet from them. The beam of a policeman's torch swept over the rubbish and shone straight into Phoolan's eyes as she peered through a small gap, making her squint. Her finger was on the trigger.

But she held her fire. The torch beam had found another corner. The policeman was out of her vision but she could hear him kick against cans and bottles. And then, on top of her, she felt the boxes move. Should she fire? Was Man Singh about to shoot? There could be no communication between them. More boxes shifted. She felt the policeman pulling at the clothing. Now he would see, surely, that the lumps underneath were people. She could hear him breathing as he bent over and then he snorted and spat. She saw the torch, so close it was almost against her head. And then the beam swung away as he stood up. Suddenly, she felt a violent blow in her stomach as he gave the pile of rubbish a kick and a corner of a box caught her. She almost pulled the trigger as she jerked back with a gasp. Man Singh had moved as she fell against him. Surely the policeman had heard the noise? But

then she heard him calling that there was nothing in the hut and asking where he should go next.

The search went on through the night. Villagers draped in blankets either sat or slept on the ground. And in a pigsty Baladin, the sole survivor of the shoot-out, settled down with the swine. When he first scrambled in there after his dash to freedom the animals made a terrible commotion, squealing and grunting, but they had soon become accustomed to their new bedfellow. The crude dwelling in which the pigs were housed was tiny, and the police bypassed it altogether. Like Phoolan Devi and Man Singh he heard the searchers and even saw a policeman urinate at the entrance to the sty.

After the killing of dacoits in Sirauli and Gulauli, the ravines of Bundelkhand and the Chambal Valley were alive with gossip. It spread to the towns and by the time it reached the cities the news was that Phoolan Devi was among those killed. The reputable *Hindustan Times* reported on 1 April, 1981: 'Three members of the most sought-after dacoit gang, led by nineteen-year-old bandit beauty Phoolan Devi, were killed in an encounter with the police in Jalaun district. The elusive Phoolan Devi is believed to be among those killed, but no official confirmation is so far available from Jalaun.'

In the cities, high-caste, literate newspaper readers, appalled by the massacre at Behmai by a lowly Sudra, read that a 'do or die' battle was waging and that an Inspector-General of Police had taken the state helicopter and rushed to Gulauli to boost the morale of the rank and file. Before leaving Lucknow, the officer was reported as saying that he would 'try to finish the gang before sunset'.

But when the sun went down, police had five dead dacoits, one missing, four wounded officers and a question mark over the whereabouts of the Bandit Queen.

'She was probably never here,' Superintendent Bajpai told his subordinates. But his instinct told him otherwise. They searched once more and this time the old hut was completely ignored. Finally, the superintendent pulled out his weary

men. Leaving a replacement contingent in the village, he made his way back to Jalaun.

It was not until that afternoon that Phoolan heard Harar Kassain call through the smashed-in doorway. It was safe for them to come out. He saw the boxes move as the two fugitives slowly unwound their cramped bodies. Uncertain whether police were camping right outside the door, they had not moved for nearly 24 hours. They had even urinated in their clothing.

'There are still some police about, but it will be easy to pass around them,' said Harar Kassain.

At dusk, Phoolan Devi and Man Singh slipped away from the village and vanished into the labyrinth of ravines.

The escape yet again of the Bandit Queen from under the noses of the police caused another public outrage. Far from being eliminated, Phoolan Devi, the authorities had to admit, had not even been seen. Police encounters with her gang were used by Members of Parliament against their political opponents. One M.P., Mr Mukhtar Anees, claimed that the diary of a member of the Phoolan gang had been recovered by police at Behmai and was found to contain the names of ministers who were contacts. Some of the political claims did have foundation. When the body of one dacoit, lynched by Uttar Pradesh villagers, was searched, a letter from a cabinet minister was found. It thanked the bandit for helping him in his election campaign. In June 1980, at an election meeting in the Etawah district, a girl in the audience spotted, among those on the dais with the then Minister for Co-operation in Uttar Pradesh, Mr Mulayam Singh Yadav, a man who had raided her house the night before. And the successful Congress candidate in the same election, Mr Balram Singh Yadav, was accused of shielding another dacoit in his ministerial bungalow in Lucknow.

Until Behmai, the influence of politicians was regarded as one of the major factors preventing an all-out crackdown on outlaws. Many police officers spoke privately of political interference in dacoity cases. One politician, Jhandu Lal, was proved to have helped the family of a dacoit, Buddu Singh,

who operated in Uttar Pradesh because Singh had used his influence to get Lal elected. In another recorded case, Narad, a known harbourer of *baghis*, was arrested and beaten by a police officer, Santosh. Narad had helped a member of the Legislative Assembly, Bhikam Chand, in his election campaign, and when Chand heard of the arrest he used his political power to get the police officer suspended for six months.

It is in the interests of the gangs to see that members of their own communities win political elections, and candidates have been known to go as far as threatening the electorate with grave consequences should they not be supported. Coercion tactics usually run to a pattern, with candidates involved in the spreading of rumours that mass murders will be committed, village polling booths attacked and burned and ballot boxes destroyed should they not be elected. One politician in the Datia district was known to be a 'host' of a notorious dacoit gang, disposing of their booty and collecting protection money from villagers. After the 1980 elections Banarasi Dass, former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, claimed that a number of criminals had found their way into politics and that at least ten politicians were responsible for robbery and murder.

'Only when you consider all this will you understand the present state of Uttar Pradesh,' he stated. 'Nothing is functioning properly. There is no government worth its name here.'

Against this background of political manipulation, it surprised no-one to hear the police announce a find — a letter after the shoot-out at Sirauli from Phoolan Devi and Man Singh which, according to the authorities, had been discovered on the body of the dacoit Laltu. It was addressed to a member of the Legislative Assembly, Shankar Singh, and was written in Hindi, and read:

> We are in deep trouble these days. We discussed the transfer of a police inspector with you earlier and you promised to get Sub-Inspector Ramayan Singh

transferred because he is a serious threat to our operations. We helped you at the time of the elections but you have been unable to do this small job for us. You know all our hideouts are in Jalaun district and the police are putting so much heat on us that we are unable to stay anywhere even for a night. Owing to the presence of the Lalaram-Sriram gang it is very dangerous for us to cross over to the other side of the Yamuna. The station officer of Kalpi, too, has started putting pressure on us.

We requested the transfer of Ramayan Singh only, but now unless the police captain is also transferred, we cannot live in peace. We agreed to both your demands, but you have failed in keeping your promise. We have received the arms and ammunition sent by you and the payment was made to the person who brought the consignment. Get our work done quickly and convey our greetings to dacoit chiefs Vijay Singh and Chhatrapal.

Shankar Singh had attacked the state government and the Jalaun superintendent of police for shielding dacoits, after Superintendent Bajpai's failure to find Phoolan Devi in Gulauli. His party quickly came to his defence and his namesake, Mr Rajendra Singh, leader of the opposition in the Assembly, had an urgent meeting with the Chief Minister to protest against what he described as a 'malicious campaign launched by the Jalaun police'. It was obvious, said Rajendra Singh, that Jalaun police had tried to implicate Shankar Singh because he had spoken against their corrupt practices. Next, Shankar Singh defended himself, saying the letter was a fake.

'From the language of the letter, it's obvious the police have written it,' he said. 'I know that the Jalaun police superintendent has been to Lucknow to leak the letter to the press.'

There was no doubt that the public had little faith in the police for, despite river patrols, helicopter searches, expeditions by thousands of armed officers into the valleys and

ravines, Phoolan Devi was still at large. The fact that a number of major dacoits had been eliminated stemmed public wrath for only a few days, and it was not long before the tide of popular opinion was again rising against the police. In the cities demands grew for the Bandit Queen's head.

Concerned that their jobs were under threat, senior police officers regularly produced figures showing that dacoits were being arrested or killed — usually killed. On paper, the numbers were impressive. But they were not all they seemed to be. In the Yamuna region police were accused of killing the innocent, saying they were dacoits. Mr Hari Mohan Misra, convenor of the Youth Congress of Rajpur in the Kanpur district, complained that his younger brother Avadhesh Kumar and friends had been killed in a faked confrontation with the police, and that their bodies had not been returned to relatives for cremation. Misra recounted that his brother and three others had gone to Jalaun with 25,000 rupees to buy a second-hand tractor. They were shot dead by police, said Misra, at the direction of a local leader whose corrupt activities he had exposed.

'The police claimed that the four were planning to loot buses and trucks,' said Misra. 'They even said they recovered four rifles from them, while the fact was that they had gone unarmed to buy the tractor. There was no mention of the money they were carrying.' Police, he said, had refused to register a complaint by him and had threatened that he would be harmed if he did not keep quiet.

In the valleys, the violence used to curb dacoity was generating more violence. More people armed themselves for their own protection, and eyed neighbours of a different caste with suspicion. As for the police, they continued to deny any misuse of power, refuting suggestions that quotas had been fixed for the extinction of dacoits. However, it did look as though promotion in police ranks depended on the number of dacoits netted or eliminated, so their denials were greeted with some scepticism.

The opposition Lok Dal party compiled a list of what they said were fake encounters in eight districts, claiming that

nearly 200 people had been killed who were neither dacoits nor criminals. In most cases, stated Mr Mulayam Singh Yadav, President of the Uttar Pradesh Lok Dal, police took an arrested person to the station, beat him, tied him to a tree and then shot him. In the station records, another 'encounter' would be notched. And, said Singh, 99 per cent of those shot were from the lower castes. Claims of police brutality were not confined to Uttar Pradesh. Because of the publicised success of their counterparts across the border, anti-dacoity police in Madhya Pradesh stepped up their campaign against the outlaws.

While tourists from around the world wandered through the ancient temples of Khajuraho, where exquisite examples of Hindu sculpture are to be seen, police at Chhatarpur, only 19 miles away, were conducting a terrible purge. Thirteen young men suspected of being dacoits became impotent when they were beaten and given electric shocks through their genitals. Several months earlier, in the city of Bhagalpur, in Bihar State, the eyes of a number of men accused of being dacoits had been gouged out by police. Another brutal crack-down took place at Chhatarpur.

The town lies in the heart of Bundelkhand. None of the guidebooks or pamphlets issued to tourists recommends that visitors to Khajuraho extend their tour to the town. For poverty here is at its lowest level, and poor beg and steal what they can. In the outlying districts, every low-caste villager is suspected by the authorities of being in league with *baghis* so it was no surprise when, in the wake of Behmai, police appeared in the villages and began asking questions.

At Rakshapurwa village, four miles north of Chhatarpur, Hulla Kachi, a young casual labourer on a starvation-level existence, was dragged from his bed at three o'clock in the morning and asked about a dacoity. When he denied any knowledge of it, he was taken by jeep to Chhatarpur and locked up. In an affidavit he was to sign later Kachi claimed that '. . . the policemen started beating me up. Then a constable, following orders, stripped me naked. They applied one wire on the finger of my right hand and another on my

genitals and switched on the current. My whole body went numb and I began to feel very thirsty. This sort of thing went on for twenty minutes. Then I fainted. When I recovered consciousness much later that night I found myself in a cell. In the morning when I went to urinate, I found my urine to be a little red. The next day, on the instructions of the inspector, I was brought to the office and again undressed and then they began to question me about a theft of which I knew nothing. When I said as much, I was given the Laxman Jhula treatment — hung upside down and beaten up. I was only taken off when my eyes had become bloodshot. After that, once again electric shocks were administered to my genitals until I became unconscious. For three more days this torture went on. The police wanted me to confess to the theft, but since I had not stolen, how could I confess? How could I tell them where those stolen goods were?'

Kachi was eventually charged with planning a dacoity. He said they had just added his name to a list of others who had been arrested. Granted bail, he returned home to his 20-year old wife, Sheela. 'We slept on the same bed for four nights and then I realised that the police torture had made me impotent. On the fifth day, she stopped sleeping on the same bed. One day, she made the excuse that she was going to the bazaar and she left for her father's house in Chhatarpur.'

During that same police purge, Devendra Kumar Pathak, a student from the dacoit-infested Hamirpur district of Uttar Pradesh, travelled to Chhatarpur to continue his studies. He had once had a high school teacher whose younger brother was Raju Bhatnagar, a well-known dacoit. Pathak knew Raju Bhatnagar from his schooldays and when Bhatnagar formed a gang Devendra Pathak's brother ran off with it. It was inevitable that Pathak would be seized by police, for they were interrogating anyone who either knew dacoits or who had relatives belonging to gangs. On March 13, 1981, a month after the Behmai massacre, he was studying in his room when the police arrived and took him to the station.

'They questioned me about Raju,' he was to recall later, 'and I admitted that I knew him. That same night the police

had managed to arrest a wanted member of the Raju Bhatnagar gang, Naresh Soni. At around midnight the police took a bribe of 10,000 rupees from Soni and allowed him to escape. The police chief then got me out of the lock-up, accused me and ordered that I be taught a lesson so that I would learn to keep my mouth shut. I was first beaten up. Then Naik (town inspector R. R. Naik) sent electric shocks through my genitals. I was in great pain, and terrified and readily agreed to all that they wanted me to confess to. I thought they would kill me if I didn't. For thirteen days the police kept me ... On March 26 I was presented before a court and then formally jailed. On March 27 I got bail. The police did not object to my bail application because I had promised them that I would not tell anyone about the bribe they had taken and how they had let Naresh Soni get away.'

Real dacoits, said families of the tortured, were allowed to go free on payment of huge bribes, while the innocent poor were forced to make false confessions so that police records would look good. Student Bharat Kumar Agarwal complained of being tortured because he could not pay a bribe.

'I was picked up by the Rajnagar police and taken to the police station,' he remembered. 'I started trembling when I saw what was going on there.' Agarwal saw two police officers beating up a group of men and applying electric wires to their genitals. 'Lakhanlal Bhat (whom I later came to know) was screaming. His testicles had become wounded and blood was coming out of them. Hiralal Chowdhury, the police officer, turned to me and asked me my father's name. I told him. He said that I was the son of a well-to-do person, and if I did not bring 8,000 rupees I would be sent to jail. I said I could not bring the money and they immediately started beating me up. For three days I got the electric shock treatment and was swung on the Laxman Jhula ...'

# CHAPTER TWELVE

THE GANGS were in complete disorder. With Mustaqim dead, his men had moved to other districts and joined up with smaller groups. The remainder of Phoolan Devi's men had also fled to other areas hearing of the deaths of their associates. Phoolan Devi and Man Singh were alone against thousands of police.

They slipped into sympathetic villages for food and shelter, but they knew that the price on their heads made a stay of more than a few hours extremely dangerous. Every village had its informer, even those inhabited by Mallahs. And as if there were not enough problems for the gangs, Phoolan's deadly enemies, Sriram and Lalaram Singh, had pulled off a job which sent even more police into the ravines. Anxious to build up their financial resources and weapon stocks, the brothers, operating alone, moved in on Seme village. While they were robbing a house three police officers who had been tipped off about their presence arrived and pushed open the door. Immediately, the Singh brothers opened fire and Sub-Inspector Bhure Lal fell dead. Before his colleagues, Station Officer Kali Ram and Constable Indrajit Singh, could fire, they were also shot dead. The brothers then grabbed two rifles and 50 cartridges from the officers' bodies and made their escape. Armed with their new weapons, the brothers next kidnapped an Orai businessman, Mr Deo Narayan Tewari; in a letter demanding a ransom of 100,000 rupees they told his son: 'If you do not act within a week, you will find your father's dead body on the road

between Kalpi and Orai.' The ransom was paid.

Meanwhile, an Indian newspaper writer reported that one of the police officers had been mutilated after being shot and that his testicles had been burned. High-ranking police officials tried to discredit the information, but the story persisted. PAC men, too, insisted it was true.

The activities of Sriram and Lalaram Singh caused a political storm. Ironically, the murder of the police officers had simply increased the authorities' determination to see Phoolan Devi eliminated. There were questions as to why the Thakur brothers did not share equal billing at the top of the wanted list with their Mallah counterpart. It was suggested that Sriram and Lalaram had an officer or two in their pocket — and this was to be hinted at regularly over the next two years as they remained free to loot and kill. The pressure on the police forces was enormous and villagers feared for their lives and those of relatives who fell into the hands of the anti-dacoity forces. Low-caste and high-caste, they all wished Phoolan Devi would be caught soon. Even the gangs, many of them now regrouped, decided that the only way they were going to find some degree of peace was by eliminating the Bandit Queen.

Phoolan and Man Singh sat on the banks of the Yamuna. It was one of the rare occasions on which she wore a sari. On the middle finger of her right hand was a silver ring containing a stone found in the head of a poisonous fish. Her paramour had given it to her that morning. No harm came to the person wearing such a ring, he had told her. Even Malkhan Singh had a ring like that. It was rare; you couldn't buy it for money.

'Until you take it off, you will remain my woman,' he had told her.

Now they sat watching a colourful butterfly opening and closing its wings on a rock. 'It is so free,' she said. 'That is the difference between us.'

'You want to stop this running? You want to surrender?'

'Surrender! What hope would we have? They would shoot

us down like dogs. Like they shot Baba Mustaqim. Malkhan Singh has been in these ravines for years — can you see him surrendering?'

They were both filthy. Her bobbed hair was caked with mud; grime was embedded in their fingernails and between their toes. They walked and slept in the same clothes, hiding their police uniforms in a cheap plastic bag carried by Man Singh. But her power lay in her rifle and she insisted on toting it, slung around her shoulders. She was an odd sight: slight, clothed in traditional peasant garb and wearing a gun. Man Singh's bag also held a tarpaulin in which they wrapped themselves to sleep. There were bullets, some stale *chapattis*, and matches. Though a 'queen', she was poorer than the poorest in her domain. The reverence accorded her by the dacoit gangs after Behmai had vanished, as had her followers, killed and scattered to the four winds.

Mustaqim had been right: women were bad luck. He had paid the price for working with her. As had Vikram. But Man Singh was still with her. For she was his woman and he admired her courage and her belief in the deity. Whenever they reached a shrine or a temple, she asked the goddess for her blessing. Durga would protect them; Phoolan assured Man Singh of that. Once, in Mustaqim's village, she had a dream. She had woken Man Singh, which had made him angry.

'Man Singh, Man Singh! We are in danger! The little lady has come to me. We are going to be surrounded by police. We must run. If we leave now, we can be safe.'

He had told her to be quiet, turned over and gone back to sleep. Later she woke him again.

'Man Singh! The police are close. We are going to be surrounded. My goddess says run, run!'

But again he had ignored her and then he had been wakened by Harar Kassain, telling him that police were in the village.

In the past few days she had been talking of danger again, but believed her goddess would protect them. He had asked what the danger was, but she had not been able to tell him. Only that they would be protected.

They headed downriver for the bridge that crossed the Yamuna to Kalpi, soaked to the skin. It was July and rain lashed at their bodies. There were few dry places in the ravines. Phoolan was determined to go back to her village for the festival of Raksha Bandhan, when sisters tie threads around the wrists of their brothers. But crossing the Yamuna by boat was impossible — every fishing vessel and ferry boat had been confiscated by the police to make the movement of dacoit gangs more difficult. Arriving at the iron bridge that night, they were surprised to see that no police guards had been posted there. In torrential rain, they slipped across the river and made their way back up the left bank to Gorhapurwa. Her parents were horrified to see her when she shook them awake in the middle of the night. But her brother was delighted and apologised for having no gift for her; it is a tradition that brothers give something to their sisters during Raksha Bandhan. During their two-day stay in the village, Phoolan and Man Singh slept in an underground tunnel which had been dug under the floor of one of the houses. Even in her own village, Phoolan knew she could trust no-one, particularly her cousin Maiyadin and Suresh, son of the *sarpanch*. Her father wanted to be rid of her immediately.

'Do you want us to be arrested and killed?' he shouted. 'Get out of this village! The police come here all the time. If you are found, it will be the end of us all!'

They slipped out under cover of darkness and headed downriver. During their stay they had decided to get out of the ravines for a time until police interest cooled. Man Singh had mentioned he once travelled up to Deoria, a town near the Nepalese border, about 250 miles away. He had friends there. They would be fed and the police would not guess who they were. They could take a train from somewhere outside Lucknow: they had enough money to pay the fare.

Close to Kalpi late one afternoon they suddenly walked in on four men asleep under a banyan tree. They were in police uniforms but their long hair gave them away as dacoits. Phoolan Devi and Man Singh did not immediately recognise which gang they belonged to but, waking at the sound of their

footsteps, one shouted, 'That damn bitch, Phoolan Devi!'

Realising they had no protection, Man Singh grabbed Phoolan's hand and dragged her towards a group of trees. Bullets thudded into the trunks as the couple dived for cover.

'Who are they?' asked Phoolan as, kneeling with her rifle to her shoulder, she returned the fire.

'Surendra Singh. The police killed five of his gang. He wants you dead.'

'They all do.'

They were fortunate to have landed up against a rocky mound surrounded by a dense thicket. Surendra and his associates, on the other hand, had scant cover, but were determined to do what they could to put an end to Phoolan Devi. Shots were exchanged for nearly fifteen minutes before Surendra withdrew, concerned not so much by the fire from Phoolan Devi and Man Singh as by the fact that the noise might alert a police patrol.

'I think they've gone,' said Man Singh. 'We must move quickly before police come.'

Phoolan did not reply. She turned and sat with her back to a tree and gripped her knee. Blood oozed through her jeans, reddening her hands. Man Singh pulled off her jeans. A bullet had taken a slice out of her leg, beside the knee. He quickly wrapped a rag around the wound. It was imperative they get away from there quickly.

That night, Phoolan Devi developed a fever. She tossed and turned in the tarpaulin and cried with pain. Sweat poured from her and Man Singh knew that unless she was better by sunrise she would have to have medical help. There was no sunrise — it was pouring with rain again. He turned and crouched on his knees so that the canvas hung like a tent over the ill woman. But the cover was wet through and of little use. Man Singh examined the wound. It had been weeping all night and her leg was discoloured six inches around. He would have to get her to a doctor. He knew of one in Gwalior — a friend of a cousin — who could be trusted; but Gwalior was miles away. Probably a day by public transport.

'Phoolan, you must walk to the main road. We are going to risk a bus and then the train. You need a doctor.'

She nodded. 'I'll make it.'

It took most of the day to reach the main road which runs from Kanpur to Jhansi. Ironically, the buses had already stopped operating for the day because of the bandit menace, particularly because Phoolan Devi was still at large. They slept just off the road. Phoolan had been able to walk on the leg and her condition had not worsened. But the wound was festering and throbbed, and she had a fitful night. As soon as they rose, they covered the rifles with the tarpaulin and stuffed them into a rocky crevice. When the first bus came along, Man Singh ran out and stopped it. The driver did not give them a second glance; they looked like any villagers heading for the city. The old bus was practically empty and Phoolan sat at the back where she could stretch her leg out into the aisle. Once they passed a police patrol at the roadside, but no attempt was made to stop the vehicle. At Jhansi they transferred to the train for the 60-mile journey north to Gwalior. It was morning when the train pulled into the station. A few police were on the platform, so Man Singh and Phoolan disembarked separately, losing themselves in the bustle and noise.

Bicycles with ringing bells, scooter taxis and honking cars narrowly missed the two dacoits as they walked up over the viaduct near the station and headed towards the city. The huge old fort, perched on red cliffs, loomed on their right under a black and threatening sky. By the time they reached the bridge leading to the maze of narrow streets and mysterious alleys they were soaked through again. Phoolan Devi was limping noticeably and was near collapse when Man Singh pushed open a door in a side street and called a name.

After the first week of treatment the wound showed signs of healing. The doctor was discreet. He did not ask for payment. If it ever came out that he had treated Phoolan Devi he would at least have the defence that it was under duress.

Her sari hid the bandage when she ventured into the

streets. They walked past policemen and laughed to themselves when the officers looked straight through them — the police still did not know what the woman dacoit looked like, and with locks trimmed and beard shaved Man Singh's appearance had changed dramatically. They even walked together past the Gwalior police station and sat on the steps outside the Collector's office. Phoolan loved the feel of the city: the wobbling cyclists, honking cars, horses pulling carts filled with people, spice shops, stores laden with colourful silks, the blare of transistor radios. It was only the second time she had experienced it all, and she was reminded of that first trip to Kanpur with Kailash. She had seen a film then about dacoits called *Sholay* (*Flames*). She had enjoyed that movie and if it had been showing in Gwalior she would have gone again.

Made in India's 'Hollywood', Bombay, *Sholay* was released in 1975 and police blamed the censors who passed it for inspiring dacoity. In one scene, dacoits killed all the members of a family while the head, the real enemy, was away. The murders were depicted in gruesome detail, each killing being shown in agonising slow-motion. Mr Mohan Das Menon, a former police superintendent in charge of Agra, told his superiors that in three cases while interrogating dacoits he learned they had been influenced by the killing scene. One dacoit had told Menon: 'The leader of my gang said he would take revenge in the Sholay style.' Behmai, Menon pointed out, was one of a series of mass killings by dacoits since the film was released. Twelve people were killed by the Geetam gang early in 1979; Chhabiram's group murdered all the family members of a man called Badshah, who had been involved in a land dispute with Chhabiram, though Badshah himself escaped; and in 1980, twelve members of a family were killed by Vaidyaram's gang in Agra, while again the man they had come to murder survived.

Phoolan Devi had to be content with a choice of romantic movies in Gwalior. Man Singh bought himself a Japanese watch from a street trader and purchased for her a silver bracelet. But they could not, of course, live on love alone and

cash was running low; neither could they ask the Indian government to hand over to them the two rupees a week paid out to the poor.

Her knee had now healed. It was time to move on, despite assurances from Man Singh's friends that they would continue to look after them. Their move was more rapid than they anticipated. Late one afternoon one of the women of the house ran in to warn them that the doctor had been picked up and taken to the police station. The two dacoits knew what that meant — the authorities could arrive at any time. Even as they received the warning, two police jeeps were speeding towards the northern side of the town. Grabbing their bags, Man Singh and Phoolan Devi ran through a rear door into a back street.

'Take this!' hissed the harbourer, and thrust a revolver into Man Singh's hand.

They stopped a scooter taxi and ordered it to take them out on the airport road. A few miles from the airport they got out and hurried down a track leading east along the wide plain. Ahead, 30 miles away, lay the Chambal River and familiar territory: the ravines.

But first they had a job to do. They had been given the name of a wealthy farmer who lived near Gohad, west of Bhind. He was a perfect subject for a kidnapping and it turned out to be far easier than they had imagined. The man was pointed out to them as he sat on a bed outside his house.

'This,' said Man Singh, without even producing the revolver, 'is Phoolan Devi. We have come to kidnap you for ransom. You have a choice. You come with us and we wait for money, or you give us what valuables and money you have with you and we will go.'

The farmer and his relatives made their contributions, paying the ransom without being abducted. Phoolan Devi and Man Singh left the village with 2,000 rupees in cash and gold and silver jewellery. They were now set up to take their holiday on the Nepalese border.

From the air, the ravines straddling the border of Uttar

Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh have the appearance of a vast collage in velvet. Pinched and pleated folds interspersed with sunbaked village clusters are crisscrossed by big rivers and their tributaries and a myriad bullock-cart tracks. Some of the ravine landscape has been beautifully rounded by centuries of steady erosion, while other areas have been savaged by the elements, leaving high peaks and jagged cliffs overlooking drops of hundreds of feet. Nature has designed a startling canvas in greens and greys, ochre and chalk. But it is better admired at a distance. Temperatures range from near zero in winter to more than 110 degrees during the height of the monsoon period. To live there or to cross the region calls for emotional and physical endurance.

Police patrol teams, who spent six weeks at a time in this territory, wearily made their way back to the historic city of Kalpi, headquarters for the hunt for the Bandit Queen, officially co-ordinated under the name 'Operation Phoolan'. Her success at avoiding arrest or elimination was a constant frustration to the Additional Inspector-General of Police, Mr Tushar Dutt, now in charge of the campaign. 'Where the hell is this bloody woman?' he asked a conference of deputy inspectors-general and police superintendents. No-one actually said it, but they all thought that if they knew the answer they wouldn't be sitting there.

'How are the men coping?' Dutt wanted to know.

They were tired, he was told. Most had not seen their families for months. Tensions were high because the men knew that in the ravines they could be shot down at any moment.

'Send them out again!' said Dutt. He was determined that Phoolan Devi should be run to ground.

Across the border, police in Madhya Pradesh were also gnashing their teeth. It was now known that Phoolan Devi had crossed into that state, received medical treatment in Gwalior and apparently — although villagers were afraid to talk — extorted money from a farmer under threat of kidnapping. Mr K.K.Puri, Deputy Inspector-General of the Gwalior district, studied a list of reported kidnappings and

dacoities and blamed Phoolan Devi for the increase in crime. Dacoits in his area had been out to show that whatever Phoolan Devi could do they could do just as well, although there had been no massacres like Behmai. But the kidnappings were a real headache; dacoit gangs were springing up from nowhere since Behmai despite the increased police effort to stamp them out.

The ravines in Puri's district contained fourteen listed gangs with an estimated strength of 175 armed men. Of these gangs, the most talked about were led by Malkhan Singh, Ghanshyam, Pancham, Ganga Singh Dhimar, Pan Singh and — if she was still in his district — Phoolan Devi. Even if she had slipped back over the border she had certainly left her influence behind. Dacoits who were arrested spoke of her constantly, saying how they regarded her as a tough lady. Puri was aware that scores of crimes believed to have been committed by the woman bandit would never be reported, because of the fear she instilled in victims, their relatives and witnesses. He knew that villagers of the same caste still aided her, and he wasn't made any happier by the words of one of his sub-inspectors who told him one morning: 'It is almost us against the dacoits with the villagers cheering them on. Our informers are few, theirs number thousands.'

Puri sat at his desk looking through the police files. He hoped Phoolan Devi was out of his district, although the indications were that she was still lingering somewhere in the east of the state. Certainly, there had been several kidnappings, but the suspected victims always pleaded total ignorance. In the Chambal district there were something like 25,000 licensed firearms and yet when dacoits moved into the villages residents were afraid to fire at them.

The Deputy Inspector-General flicked through Malkhan Singh's file: 38 years old, wanted on something like 100 charges, eighteen relating to murder, the rest to kidnapping. What a coup it would be to put an end to his capers! As the overall head of the gangs, his elimination would undoubtedly demoralise many others. His influence stretched into every *baghi* group — and beyond. There was a rumour that a local

Member of the Legislative Assembly had gone to meet Malkhan in his hideout to ask for his support. And only a few months previously it was thought that he had met a minister in Delhi to discuss a surrender. As part of the initial negotiations, it was suggested, Malkhan had acquired a rubber motor-boat fitted with a powerful engine, on an import licence in the name of an MP! After being on the run for nearly five years Malkhan was rumoured to be considering a formal surrender. The reports emerged after a member of Malkhan's gang shot dead one of the emperor's oldest and deadliest enemies in broad daylight in a shop in Bhind. Malkhan Singh had that kind of influence on *baghis*: they would readily murder for him, as Sobaran Singh had been prepared to when he planned the murder of Phoolan Devi in Sirauli village.

It was rumoured that Malkhan was tired of being hounded by police forces in three states and of living away from family comforts. Unknown to Puri, who should have been informed as to what was going on, Malkhan Singh had written a letter to Mr Madhavarao Scindia, an MP, and to the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, Mr Arjun Singh. He would surrender, he said, if it could be guaranteed that he would not be given the death sentence and that he be allowed to make a public speech. He also insisted on the restoration in his home village of temple land which had been illegally cultivated by a group of powerful men.

Only one police officer was informed about Malkhan Singh's moves — Rajendra Chaturvedi, who was to make his mark as a courageous and skilled negotiator.

'Is it true that Malkhan Singh wants to surrender?' Puri asked Chaturvedi. But the superintendent only smiled and shrugged. He had been sworn to secrecy. Negotiations with Malkhan were so delicate that the less people knew, the less danger there was of their breaking down. For Chaturvedi had met Malkhan on several occasions and was now trying to persuade the Chief Minister to accept the bandit chief's conditions for surrender.

Malkhan Singh had been born into a Midhra-caste family

of cowherds in Bilao village, near Bhind. Like others in the *baghi*-dominated territory, he came into contact with dacoits as a child. His village, in the heart of the Chambal Valley, was frequented by bandits and he earned a few *paise* acting as their errand boy. Later, he proved himself to be a good singer and entertained visiting dacoits with *bhajans*. It was not until he was 21 — relatively old to start getting into trouble — that he came to the notice of the police when convicted for keeping an unlicensed weapon. Six years later he was before the courts again, this time on the more serious charge of shooting down a Harijan (an untouchable) in his village.

He was eventually released by the High Court on bail of 10,000 rupees. Believing that he had leadership qualities, Malkhan got involved in village politics and was elected to the village *panchayat*. The *sarpanch*, Kailash Sharma, was an old enemy: Malkhan believed it was Sharma who had pushed to have him sentenced to life on the murder charge. Then, in 1973, Sharma's men killed a friend of Malkhan's.

Two years later, Sharma had removed him from membership of the *panchayat* on the grounds that he had been convicted in a criminal case. Shortly afterwards, one of Sharma's close relatives ran off with a girl from Malkhan's family. Malkhan went to the police, but they refused to act. It was the last straw. He decided to act as his own judge and jury. On May 5, 1976, he walked into his village with a sten gun and released a few rounds at Sharma, who was walking in the street. Sharma survived, but another man was killed. Malkhan took to the ravines. It did not take him long to link up with other desperadoes and to become their leader. In his wake, he left a trail of murder, armed robbery and kidnapping, but it was to be one of his men, Kashiram, who killed Sharma, in a shop in Bhind. Malkhan was so grateful that he led his gang to Kashiram's village just a week later and eliminated four of Kashiram's enemies. The dacoit leader's devotion to his men, the kindness and generosity he showed poor villagers and his abilities as a leader earned him great respect throughout the valleys. But now he was tired of running. He was ready to give himself up.

Phoolan Devi and Man Singh laid low on the Nepalese border for six months. From Deoria, Man Singh's friends took them to the Gandak River, which they crossed by ferryboat; they then made their way by bus to the border town of Raxaul. The climate during the winter months was perfect: such a relief from the humidity of the lower plains. They stayed in a household suggested by Man Singh's friends and commenced selling all their stolen jewellery for almost twice the price they could have received in Madhya Pradesh or Uttar Pradesh. In a border town, there was more free trade and if they weren't satisfied with one offer there were always the other buyers.

The Bandit Queen and her paramour spent most of their time at the cinema, chewing cashew nuts in the front stalls. Phoolan was mad about any kind of film. As she whiled away the time in the dark, watching the big screen, police patrols were combing the ravines of Central India in search of her. Whenever they investigated dacoit attacks, villagers told them that Phoolan Devi had been there, such was the aura she carried. They had not seen her, but yes, she had definitely been there. And the authorities, without proof to the contrary, attributed innumerable dacoities to the enigmatic Bandit Queen.

Despite her relaxed surroundings, Phoolan could not shake off her hatred for the Singh brothers. She was haunted by thoughts of revenge. Sometimes, when she made love with Man Singh, memories of the pack rape overcame her. She believed that those days of captivity and defilement had deprived her of desire. Man Singh was her man and she readily submitted to him, but she felt nothing. It would be like that, she often told Man Singh, until she personally sliced off their pricks and watched them bleed to death. Well, she had got her revenge on some of those motherfuckers in Behmai, but there would be no rest for her until she had wiped Lalaram and Sriram off the face of the earth. She prayed to Durga sometimes for two hours a day, asking over and over for the chance to avenge the death of Vikram and her humiliation.

At the beginning of 1982, Phoolan and Man Singh

travelled in a lorry to Uttar Pradesh. They had two rifles each and 200 rounds of ammunition. The truck was slow and the journey took nearly five days. On a quiet stretch of road south-west of Kanpur, the two dacoits climbed from the vehicle and ran towards the ravines. They were back in business. But they were desperately short of money again and they wanted more weapons to build up their manpower. She knew a village in the Jalaun district where several weapons were kept but she had stayed clear of it in the past because the residents were of her own caste. Now she felt she could trust no-one in the valley, so to rob her own people meant nothing. Entering the tiny community at night, she fired a rifle and shouted, 'I am Phoolan Devi. Bring me your guns!'

One of the village elders approached her. 'Phoolan Devi. The police have been here many times searching for you. And now you come to rob us.'

'Be quiet, old man! Guns, bring me your guns!'

But he insisted on talking to her. 'Did you know they arrested your mother? Did you know they have taken your relatives to the police station and beaten them? Why have you brought these things upon your family?'

'I have no family!' she snapped and pushed him away.

They left the village with plastic to sleep on, four rifles and food. She wanted to 'feel' the ravines again, to hear the crack of a gun, before she made a determined attempt to hunt down Sriram and Lalaram Singh. Within weeks, Phoolan Devi had attracted enough *baghis* to form another gang. She went into action with ten men, a mixture of Muslims and Sudras — there were to be no Thakur bastards in her group — and set about finding the Singh brothers. It was inevitable that she should hear about the stepped-up police activity during her absence. Many gangs had been wiped out, although some had been lucky enough to surrender. Then came news which shocked her. Malkhan Singh was negotiating to surrender. He had set up camp in what had been declared as a 'peace zone' near Madanpura village in the Bhind district of Madhya Pradesh and was in contact with the Chief Minister, Arjun Singh, and a police officer called Chaturvedi.

Some twenty miles from Bhind, across the Chambal River, Phoolan Devi met one of Malkhan's gang members, Muslim. He was Mustaqim's brother and had joined Malkhan's gang with the intention of avenging his brother's death.

'Is it true', asked Phoolan, 'that Malkhan is to surrender?'

'It will happen in a few days. He wanted me to join him but I have my brother's death to avenge.'

'Baba Mustaqim might have been your brother. But he was my friend.'

They talked into the night.

On June 17, Malkhan Singh formally surrendered his rifle to the Chief Minister, Arjun Singh. A vermilion *tilak* on his forehead, he jumped from a jeep driven by Rajendra Chaturvedi and, climbing onto a dais erected for the event, turned to the thousands who had gathered, saluting them with his gun raised high in both hands. The bandit chief, wearing a police uniform, grinned broadly and the crowd erupted, shouting his name. It was as if he were a conquering warrior returning home after a long battle. Accompanied by nineteen members of his gang, he bowed to the Chief Minister before laying his Chinese automatic rifle, a 9 mm revolver and a dagger at the feet of a statue of the *baghis*' deity, the Goddess Durga.

Before the ceremony in Bhind, he had visited his native village, Bilao, where he was also given a hero's welcome. Then a convoy of government vehicles had accompanied him for the drive to the formal surrender ceremony. Other vehicles, including buses, stopped at the roadside and drivers and passengers alike piled out to shout his name. The emperor of dacoits attracted as much salutation as the Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi, could have hoped for, had she passed by.

But over the border, in Uttar Pradesh, there were no smiles. Police and government officials accused Chief Minister Singh of being the one who had really given up. For, as part of Malkhan's terms, Singh had permitted many members of his gang, Muslim included, to return to the ravines since they were not ready to turn themselves in.

Revenge against their enemies was still on their minds, and until it had been exacted they could not lay down their arms. The Chief Minister had also allowed them to carry away some of the gang's sophisticated weapons. The furious Uttar Pradesh Government declared that given the chance it would not have agreed to any conditions laid down by Malkhan Singh and it was still going to go ahead and prosecute him and his gang for more than 40 offences alleged to have been committed in the state. What angered the Uttar Pradesh Government most was the fact that Malkhan Singh had been busy collecting ransom money until the last moment and, despite this, was still given VIP treatment. 'Who do they think he is — Robin Hood?' asked one minister. Uttar Pradesh politicians were also appalled that the surrendering dacoits had been allowed to share the same platform as the Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister.

'If you commit one murder in Madhya Pradesh, you are arrested and thrown in jail,' said a senior police officer in Lucknow. 'If you commit twenty you become a hero and get special treatment. There is no justice in that state. Let them come to me when I have a gun in my hand.'

Exactly ten days after the surrender, India was rocked by two more mass murders on the same night. Eleven inhabitants of Dastampur village, including four women and two children, were gunned down by Mustaqim's brother, Muslim, and a gang of dacoits. In Rampura, 30 miles east of Agra, six more villagers were mown down by gunfire.

Just after eleven on the night of June 27, 1982, an open Matador truck carrying a dozen dacoits, most in police uniform and carrying semi-automatic weapons, including machine-guns, sped into the centre of Dastampur village. It was near here, a year earlier, that Mustaqim had been attacked by a group of college boys before being shot by the police. Now Muslim, aided by his accomplices, was about to avenge his brother's death. It was pitch dark and the dacoits carried torches which shone into the eyes of the villagers and made identification of their oppressors impossible.

First they called at the house of the village chief, Pyarelal. As he rose from his bed, bullets thudded into his naked chest. Then the gang searched out the home of Pyarelal's elder brother, Motilal, and murdered him. Already the women were beginning to cry in terror, but there was to be no mercy. Dacoits clambered onto the rooftops and shone torches through the open skylights into the faces of the villagers. They were asked to call out their names. All Muslims were unharmed. But anyone associated with the students who had captured Mustaqim was shown no mercy. One of the injured, Sitaram, was to recall later that during the raid he saw the silhouette of what he thought was a woman on a roof. And she was singing.

The invaders knew who they were looking for. They found Pyarelal's daughters-in-law, Ram Shree and Ram Dulari, his sister-in-law, Sharbata, his married niece, Kanti, and his ten-year-old grandson, Shiroman. Suddenly awakened by the shots and the beam of light on his face, 14-year-old Suresh Singh started screaming uncontrollably until a bullet penetrated his skull. He had been mentally retarded. The bloodletting continued, a systematic mass execution of the defenceless. Gangacharan Yadav, Ujagar Yadav and his son-in-law Jagdish ... they all died.

'Are there any more members of the Pyarelal family?' Muslim demanded of a neighbour.

'If you have killed all those in that house, you have now killed them all. Why have you picked them?'

'Tell those who ask that two of the grandsons of Pyarelal caught Mustaqim. Now, where is Ganga Charan?'

Ganga Charan was another village elder who was on Muslim's execution list. But the old man, hearing the shots, had herded his family from the house and led them away in the darkness towards the nearby Derapur police station. Finding the house empty, Muslim cursed blindly. There were signs of a hurried departure — bedclothes flung back, a shoe in the doorway. It was obvious they had gone for help. Muslim called to his gang. It was time to leave. The noise of the truck starting drowned the sounds that filled the air: the

screams and wails of the bereaved, the howling dogs, the crying children.

All senior police officers in the area raced to the village at daybreak. The Additional Inspector-General of Police, Mr Tushar Dutt, stood in the square with Superintendents Vijay Nath Singh and M. B. Menor. They looked at the villagers' terrified and grief-stricken faces and watched some families leaving their homes with their scanty possessions. They were going to chance their luck in the cities.

'These people,' said Dutt, nodding towards those departing, 'have they been interviewed?'

'They all tell the same story,' said Menor. 'It was a calculated killing, a vendetta, and when they left they shouted *"Baba Mustaqim ki jai!"*'

Dutt had already heard the reports of the other massacre in Rampura village. It seemed there was no connection. Six Harijans, the lowest Sudras, had been shot dead and three others injured. The bandits, who used twelve-bore country-made weapons, were suspected of belonging to a gang run by the dacoit Bhura.

Dutt turned to watch a group of PAC men arriving. 'I'll keep them posted here. It might help to instil some confidence in these people. You know, of course, the question that's burning in my mind?'

Vijay Nath Singh knew because it was one of the first points raised by Dutt earlier. 'Phoolan Devi? Some of these people suspect she was here. They know Muslim was present because he told them he was wreaking revenge for the death of his brother.'

'The others could not be identified?'

'No chance. Torches were shone into everyone's eyes. Some of the villagers dared look through their doorways and saw the dacoits on the rooftops, but positive identification was impossible.'

There was nothing more the police could do. Dutt had arranged for a police outpost to be set up in the village and the district magistrate had sanctioned 1,000 rupees for each of the bereaved families.

Despite the lack of positive identification, rumours spread through the ravines that Phoolan Devi had been present during the Dastampur massacre. There were more reasons for her to be there, it was being said, than for her to be absent: Mustaqim had had her respect, she had already risked her life to pay her condolences to his family and she carried vengeance in her heart.

Then word spread that Phoolan was going to curb her activities because she had had a baby! The *Times of India* reported that her 'mobility seems to be restricted because of her new-born male child. Reports are that Phoolan Devi is keen on breastfeeding the child. As a result, she is able to hop from village to village only in the vicinity.'

A new police purge began. More villages, particularly those of the lower castes, were raided, and residents were pulled in for questioning. The young district magistrate of Agra, Mr Mukul Sanwal, suggested that it was these villagers who should be re-educated against harbouring bandits. 'Mere liquidation of dacoits will not solve the overall problem,' he told police in his district. 'What we need to do is open up these village areas, make them more accessible, provide better communications. The dacoits would not feel so secure and residents would feel too involved in developing their area to be concerned about helping these bandits.' But his suggestions, like so many other positive ideas, fell on deaf ears.

However, the Dastampur mayhem, like Behmai, created massive upheavals in the political sphere. Finding himself under great pressure, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mr Vishwanath Pratap Singh, handed in his resignation. The police, who were also being pressured — senior officers fearing their jobs would come under the axe — launched such a sweeping operation that they were able to arrest more than a dozen dacoits who had been with Muslim at Dastampur. But the gang leader and the others who had been with him still managed to avoid arrest. There were now three groups which the Uttar Pradesh police wanted to eliminate: Phoolan Devi's, Muslim's and the group led by Ghanshyam.

Ghanshyam, a relative of Malkhan Singh, carried great authority among dacoits. With his long hair and beard he was seen as something of a guru. A *bal brahmachari* (celibate since childhood) he was said by his gang to have extraordinary powers.

'Snakes and scorpions run all over him without doing him any harm,' Kallu, one of his followers, was to testify later. 'If someone gets bitten by a snake they have only to touch Baba's handkerchief to be cured.'

While Ghanshyam's gang amused themselves in the ravines by playing cards or listening to the radio, the leader spent his time meditating or singing *bhajans*. He had been a dacoit for ten years since running off because of a quarrel with a villager who killed his twelve-year-old nephew. Ghanshyam was proud of his self-loading rifle, but claimed he had never killed anyone unjustly with it.

The Phoolan Devi, Muslim and Ghanshyam gangs worked separately. Phoolan had built hers up to twelve and continued raiding villages. She was delighted to have linked up with one of her original members, Munna, who had been looking for her since hearing she had returned to the ravines. He had always been devoted to her and now he continued to prove it by insisting on sampling her food whenever they ate in a village in case it had been poisoned. The gang rarely met trouble in the tiny ravine communities. At the very mention of her name, villagers dropped any resistance. Anyone who did resist was shot down. While she masterminded operations, standing at Man Singh's side with her gun at waist level, her men looted and raped. The number of murders associated with her name in the Uttar Pradesh police records rose to 30. 'And these are the ones we have heard about,' said a frustrated police inspector.

Instinct saved her from police patrols and often she and her gang escaped within minutes of a confrontation. She was warned of impending disaster by Durga's appearance in her dreams. Man Singh no longer doubted her ability to steer them clear of dangerous situations. Camping between the Chambal and Yamuna Rivers, she awoke at dawn one

September day and told Man Singh that her little lady had been to her. There was going to be bloodshed. But she could not say whose. Later that day, Phoolan slipped and fell down a slope, ending up in a *khazoor* bush. A three-inch thorn pierced her leg and she yelped.

'So, Phoolan,' laughed Man Singh. 'There is your bloodshed!'

She was furious. Plucking the thorn from her leg, she cursed him and spent the rest of the day sulking. Many members of her gang also owed allegiance to other small gangs and sometimes they went off on dacoities with the leaders of those groups. It was a divisive, dangerous practice which increased their chances of arrest and possible torture. On September 24, Lakhan Singh and Dayashankar, who were members of the smaller Raghunath Mallah gang and who sometimes operated with Phoolan, were sitting at a campfire when they were surrounded by a PAC unit. They offered no resistance. Fearing for their lives, they admitted they had been with Phoolan Devi a month earlier, on Raksha Bandhan day, when she had tied ribbons to the wrists of her gang members and told them they were her brothers. The arrested men named villages where Phoolan sometimes went for food. Police raids followed, residents were beaten and questioned. But still the Bandit Queen could not be found. For Phoolan Devi was now sick and resting in a cave near the Chambal River. The thorn had poisoned her leg, the same leg that had been wounded, and the dull ache debilitated her. The ravines were stifling, but the cave was cool and the plants and bushes covering the entrance made it a good hideout. It was large enough to hold her and her lover, but the rest of the gang were camped a mile away. Once, a patrol passed within 50 yards of the mouth of the cavern, one policeman every ten yards, moving silently, heads turning slowly from side to side, almost as if they suspected the fugitives were close by.

Man Singh looked at the infected leg. It was very swollen and Phoolan was quite obviously in pain and running a fever. She was demoralised, too. Many *baghis* were still angry with her for being the prime reason for stepped-up police activity

in the ravines. She resented this attitude, knowing that any male leader who exacted such a revenge as Behmai would have been lauded as a great warrior.

She swore. 'What's the use? What's the use of anything? They'll get us in the end.'

'Malkhan Singh surrendered safely,' said Man Singh. 'They treated him well in MP.'

'He wasn't at Behmai.'

'Perhaps we should surrender. Surrender to the MP police.'

'Fucking police! How can you trust any of those dogs?'

She was pig-headed when angry. Phoolan was in such a bad mood that Man Singh decided it was best to leave her alone for a time. He would go out and scout for information.

Within a few days he returned to the cave to tell Phoolan Devi that Ghanshyam was trying to negotiate his surrender. It seemed he was tired of running.

'The fool!' snapped Phoolan Devi. 'Does he not know he will be gunned down?'

'He is negotiating with Chaturvedi, the police officer who arranged for Malkhan's surrender.'

'Ha, Malkhan was powerful. More powerful than Ghanshyam. Even the police listened to him. Ghanshyam will die, you watch.'

After a week of intense fever, Phoolan began to feel better. Man Singh had been cooking *chapattis* on hot stones in the cave and she had eaten them with fruit. Finally, she felt well enough to set off up the narrow valley in which they had been sheltering and link up with the rest of the gang. But they had travelled less than half a mile when they noticed a large contingent of uniformed men coming in their direction. They scuttled for shelter. It would be pointless trying to take them on if they were police. As they passed, Phoolan let out a hiss loud enough, Man Singh feared for a moment, to give them away. At the head of the group were Lalaram and Sriram Singh. Man Singh gripped Phoolan's rifle; he knew what was in her mind, but it would have meant their own deaths. Phoolan's breast heaved as she

lay on her stomach watching her deadliest enemies walk past unknowingly within easy rifle-shot. She would never have an opportunity like this again, she thought. If she was going to die, she would rather it was this way — putting those motherfuckers down first. She did not even think of Man Singh at that moment. When they had gone she cursed and spat at him and wanted to follow them. But Man Singh urged her to stay with him. If they got the rest of the gang they could then track the brothers down and overrun them, he argued.

But they found only three of her men, including the faithful Munna. The others, tired of waiting around, had drifted off. There would be five of them against more than 30. Phoolan Devi swore violently. Suddenly she said, 'They are working with the police! Why are the police here? Why are Sriram and Lalaram here? Because they have joined up with the police! They are all looking for me, Phoolan Devi!'

And she was right.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AT THE TIME of Phoolan Devi's illness, a shy, quietly-spoken police officer was involved in talks that he hoped would lead to the surrender of the Bandit Queen. Rajendra Chaturvedi, 38-year-old Superintendent of Police for the Bhind district of Madhya Pradesh, was negotiating the surrender of Ghanshyam. He felt that if the long-haired bandit leader could be persuaded to lay down his weapons, Phoolan Devi might follow. Ghanshyam had met Phoolan on a number of occasions and the officer felt the bandit would be a perfect negotiator on behalf of the authorities — if, of course, Ghanshyam himself could be persuaded to give up.

A proud, reserved man, Chaturvedi believed in results, not idle talk. He had built up many contacts in his earlier role as the Anti-Dacoity Superintendent of Police in Gwalior and was regarded by the *baghis* as a man of compassion. He had not harassed their familes when seeking information and always kept an eye on his men when residents were being interrogated. The superintendent had run into Malkhan Singh several times in the ravines and although there had been occasions when the dacoit emperor could have been ambushed, Chaturvedi honoured the trust the bandit held in him. For his part, Malkhan Singh came to believe that Chaturvedi was the only lawman who never broke his word, so that when he finally decided to surrender, he wanted to surrender to him and no other. That posed a slight problem, for the surrender ceremony, as with all surrenders of dacoits emerging from the ravines, would take place in Bhind, close

to the Uttar Pradesh border. Technically, that was out of Chaturvedi's area of authority. He started pulling strings, although he was later to deny putting any pressure on his superiors. But shortly after Malkhan Singh insisted that the superintendent be in Bhind for the ceremony it was announced that Rajendra Chaturvedi was being transferred to Bhind.

There were, of course, congratulations all round in Madhya Pradesh when Chaturvedi, assisted by three Indian journalists who had also met Malkhan Singh, finally negotiated the surrender. Malkhan said he was pleased to see the back of the former superintendent, claiming that he had been annoying his relatives — and anyway, Rajendra Chaturvedi was a man who could be trusted.

Coming from the emperor himself, those words put Chaturvedi on a pedestal in the eyes of many dacoits. While he went up in the bandits' estimation, his fellow officers in Uttar Pradesh accused him of being in their pockets. Across the border, they had their own ideas about what they would do with Malkhan. But criticism did not worry Chaturvedi. He would not be satisfied until he had the Bandit Queen in jail. The first move, then, was to establish a stronger contact with Ghanshyam, whom he had met on two occasions. But Ghanshyam was still unsure about his own surrender, although he confessed he was 'dog tired' of running from the UP armed patrols. He'd had too many narrow escapes to want to face many more. Through a village intermediary, Chaturvedi arranged yet another meeting with him. It was a bizarre rendezvous on the outskirts of a village in the ravines; the policeman was in old clothes, the dacoit was in police uniform.

They talked for a time about the conditions Ghanshyam would expect: no handing over to the UP authorities, no hanging, no harassment of family. Then Chaturvedi asked how Phoolan Devi was.

At first Ghanshyam feigned surprise. Why, he had never met her! But, assured there was no trickery to the question, the dacoit said he knew where she was. But surrender, as the

superintendent was now suggesting ... why would she? Behmai had angered a lot of people. They would all be calling for her to be put to death. Again, Chaturvedi had to give an assurance. She would be treated like all surrendering dacoits and given a fair trial. Behmai, he pointed out, was in Uttar Pradesh. He did not think there was a single charge he could lay against Phoolan in Madhya Pradesh except, perhaps, that of carrying an unlicensed weapon.

'Will you ask her? Will you try to interest her in surrender? Remember, Ghanshyam, in UP she is wanted dead or alive. Here, there is hardly a charge we can throw at her. You will be saving her life if you can talk her into surrendering.'

Ghanshyam breathed heavily; he was a big man who ate enormous amounts of food when he could get it. He would see what he could do. The two men nodded to each other and then they turned and went their separate ways.

Unknown to Chaturvedi, Ghanshyam was taking a two-way bet. He was also negotiating with the Uttar Pradesh authorities, trying to establish the best surrender terms for himself and his gang of sixteen. Police at Rampura in the Jalaun district had assured him he would get a fair trial if he surrendered, but Ghanshyam had insisted on more than that — he wanted a firm promise that he would not be hanged. Although he had his reservations about the trustworthiness of the UP police, he preferred to be in prison in that state because his family lived there and it would be easier for them to visit him.

To succeed in clearing Ghanshyam out of the ravines was, of course, just as important in terms of one-upmanship for the UP police as it was for the authorities over the border. Shamed by the massacres under their noses, the Uttar Pradesh Government began to release sensational figures about the number of dacoits being eliminated. They claimed that every month some 85 dacoits were killed and 900 arrested, but far from putting the minds of villagers and townspeople at rest the statistics only added to their fear and crippled the credibility of the government.

'How can the villagers feel safe,' asked an opposition MP,

'when our state appears to be seething with hundreds of thousands of dacoits?'

Any effective government, it was claimed, would have rooted out the menace long ago. Critics of the government said that even if the statistics were exaggerated by as much as 100 per cent it still meant the state was a breeding ground for bandits: the government should undertake an urgent study into the causes of the increasing numbers of dacoits. Sitting at his home in Lucknow and reading the crime statistics, N. S. Saxena, a retired police officer, estimated that by the end of the century the rate of murders in Uttar Pradesh would be the highest in the world.

Uttar Pradesh had a police force consisting of 120,000 men, with large numbers deployed around the ravines; yet Phoolan Devi, Muslim and Ghanshyam, to name a few of the leaders, continued to run free, 'cocking a snook at the police' as one opposition MP put it.

'I'm afraid,' said the new Chief Minister, Mr Sripat Mishra, to a visiting VIP, 'that what is lacking here is an efficient leadership within the police force. One of the problems is that few crimes which are reported are actually registered, so there are no follow-up investigations which would deter the offenders from committing further crimes. As a result, we are getting small-time criminals becoming bolder and eventually joining the gangs and becoming murderers.'

As the controversy raged, secret negotiations were taking place between the leaders of two gangs. Ghanshyam was meeting a representative of the Additional Inspector-General of Police, Mr R. Govil, at an arranged rendezvous point near the west bank of the Yamuna River. Just 30 miles to the south, another officer, without Govil's knowledge, was meeting the brothers Singh. Conditions were laid down with Sriram and Lalaram — as they had been more than two years earlier for the murder of Vikram Mallah. The brothers would not be harassed if they helped hunt down and kill Phoolan Devi. They had had a relatively free run, it was pointed out. Their playtime had expired. It was time to draw up a new contract. The brothers

needed no persuasion. The elimination of Phoolan Devi in exchange for no harassment was a fair bargain. Sriram and Lalaram began their enquiries. They had heard reports from time to time about her movements, but then she had disappeared for months. Now, they learned, she was back in the ravines and had re-formed her gang. It was believed she was somewhere in the Etawah district. The brothers charged their weapons, built up their food and camping stocks and set out on a determined hunt for the Bandit Queen, the bitch who had murdered so many of their own people.

It was now a question of who would ensnare Phoolan Devi first: Rajendra Chaturvedi, the Singh brothers or the Uttar Pradesh armed constabulary.

Ghanshyam, meanwhile, was in a quandary. He was anxious to surrender in Uttar Pradesh, but he remembered well the untimely end of another dacoit leader, Chhabiram. Earlier that year, police at Mainpuri, east of Agra, along with some Congress members, had met Chhabiram in secret and persuaded him to lay down his arms. All his demands would be met, he was told. But when at last he walked towards the waiting Mainpuri police they raised their guns and shot him down. Ghanshyam and every other dacoit in the ravines could not easily forget that incident. The police claimed that they suspected a trick, that Chhabiram's gang were going to open fire. There weren't many who believed that story.

Determined to pull in Ghanshyam, the Uttar Pradesh authorities enlisted the aid of two Rampura businessmen, Lalla and Matadin, who had known Ghanshyam from childhood. Another meeting was arranged with Ghanshyam in the ravines. This time Lalla and Matadin did all the talking, while the Jalaun Additional Superintendent of Police, Brijlal Verma, listened in. Other officers, including Govil, travelled to Hanumangarhi village to meet Ghanshyam's father, Bhogi Ram, and his brother, Vishnu, to give them assurances that the bandit would not be harmed. Finally Ghanshyam made up his mind; he would surrender to the Uttar Pradesh authorities. His family, he had been promised, would not be harassed and the Chief Minister

himself would be present at the surrender ceremony.

Gang leaders who decide to surrender never have much trouble persuading their men to follow — unless the members have a score to settle with an enemy first. But when Ghanshyam announced that he was going to give himself up to the Uttar Pradesh authorities, some of his dacoits voiced their disapproval. Recalling the Chhabiram incident they were sure they would be gunned down. But Ghanshyam insisted he had received firm promises. Nothing would go wrong.

Ghanshyam had sent messages to Phoolan Devi, as requested by Rajendra Chaturvedi, asking if she was interested in surrendering. But he had received no response from her. Now he wondered whether he should try to persuade her again, pointing out to her that there was always safety in numbers. The more gangs who surrendered at one time, the less chance there was of their being shot down. Ghanshyam feared for Phoolan; he had a soft spot for her because he admired her courage. He knew that if she did not surrender soon she would be dead — the police he had been meeting recently assured him of that.

While he considered what he should do about Phoolan, Ghanshyam made his way to his home village, along with his 16 gang members, to bid his family farewell. Waiting for him there, as arranged, were the Senior Superintendent of Police for Jalaun, Hakim Singh, and other high-ranking officials of the district. The surrender would take place in two days, in the grounds of the Samarjeet Inter College in Rampura. The stage for the ceremony was already being erected and the Chief Minister and top police officers were ready to travel to town.

'Now,' said Superintendent Singh, 'what about Phoolan Devi? Can you talk her into surrendering with you?'

Ghanshyam was surprised they had mentioned her; it was almost as if they had read his thoughts.

'What assurances would you give her?'

'The same as you — safe conduct, no hanging, no harassment of her family. And if you can persuade Muslim, we'd like him, too.'

Ghanshyam was asked if he had the means of contacting Phoolan. Yes, he said, he knew where she was, roughly. He would send messengers to her and ask her to meet him. In the meantime, he told the police, they must leave him with his family. He would surrender as promised in two days. And if all went well, Phoolan Devi and Muslim would be with him. Superintendent Singh thanked him and led his colleagues away.

Near her makeshift camp a few miles from Sahnson village in the Etawah district, Phoolan Devi limped away from a small tributary where she had been washing. She was barebreasted and her light brown skin gleamed in the morning sunlight. These were the moments she enjoyed: the freedom, the singing birds, the water buffalo.

But she knew it could not last. If what she believed was true, and Sriram and Lalaram were looking for her in affiliation with the police, she could die at any moment, just like Vikram. As she made her way along the path, she heard a cry from one of her nearby guards — two men were approaching. Phoolan ran back to the camp, ignoring the pain in her leg. Man Singh had already gathered up the rifles and ordered the men into position. Phoolan threw a wrap around herself and joined him behind a mound of rocks. As the strangers entered the clearing Phoolan saw they were in police uniform, but their long hair meant they were probably not police officers: though the police were up to so many tricks these days that the strangers certainly could not be trusted.

'Phoolan Devi!' they called when they saw signs of the encampment. 'We are Mansharam and Ramprakash and have come from Baba Ghanshyam.'

Two of Phoolan's gang moved in behind them. They called to Phoolan that the visitors were alone. The Bandit Queen emerged from behind the rocks.

'See,' they said, holding out a sheet of paper, 'we have his seal commanding us to take you to him.'

She snatched the document and handed it to Mehndi Hasan, the only literate member of the gang. What they had

said was true. They had come to take her to Ghanshyam because he was about to surrender and he wanted to talk to her about doing the same thing.

'There is not much time,' said Ramprakash. 'If you want to surrender you must come back with us now.'

Phoolan told them to sit. They were given water and some *dhal* while she discussed the development with Man Singh. He was in favour of surrendering. If there were two or three gangs there would be no tricks.

'I do not know what to do,' she said. 'I am tired of running. But to hand myself over to them and be locked away or even hanged — perhaps it is better to die on the run.'

'Talk to Baba Ghanshyam. Then decide.'

Phoolan ordered the gang to clear camp. They had six hours' walking ahead of them.

A short distance away, near Chaurala village, an armed police patrol waited in ambush. Within an hour or so, the Bandit Queen would be dead, the senior officers believed. These dacoits, one of them told his colleagues, were such fools. But they were not fools — they worked on a system of trust and it was this the police were trading on. Having persuaded Ghanshyam to contact Phoolan, the Uttar Pradesh authorities had him closely watched by their informers. When Mansharam and Ramprakash were despatched on their mission, their movements were tracked by a network of other informers. The fact that they had not reached a certain point in the ravines meant they had stopped somewhere along the way, just beyond Sahnson. Not wanting to scare their prey, the Sahnson police sat in wait along the route Phoolan would have to take to link up with Ghanshyam.

The sweat poured down Phoolan's face. She could not remember what it was like to feel well. When she bathed in the mornings she had a grand sense of freedom, but it was not the same as being completely whole. Sometimes she vomited all that she had eaten and on long hikes she had to rest frequently. Her cartridge belt weighed heavily on her shoulders and her rifle had become like a sack of grain. She could hardly keep up with Man Singh now. He was a short

way ahead of her, just behind Ghanshyam's emissaries. The sun was high and she knew she would have to stop soon. Her body felt as if it was full of poison and the salt of her sweat was on her lips.

Then suddenly Man Singh was stumbling over Ramprakash, who had crashed to the ground. Someone pushed her from behind and she fell straight on top of Man Singh. As bullets ripped up the ground around her, she saw that Mansharam had also fallen. His head was thrown back and blood was gushing from his mouth. She thought he was trying to say something. His eyes were wide open and blood poured from his nostrils. Then his mouth closed and she saw his sharp eyes shut. It happened in seconds and she had rolled behind a clump of trees before she could comprehend what was going on. They had been ambushed. Further along in the undergrowth she heard a man whimpering. How many of them had been hit? She could see Ghanshyam's men lying there on the dusty path. Ramprakash was trying to get up, but then he pitched back as bullets punched into him. Still he tried to escape, inching along on his back but more bullets hit him and he jerked and lay immobile.

Phoolan tried to spot their attackers. They were somewhere ahead and above them, behind one of the mounds, in a perfect ambush position. She could see nothing, not even the glimmer of a rifle barrel. She heard her men moving in the trees behind her, searching out better positions. Praise be to her goddess that they had been ambushed on the edge of a forest. She fired a few shots in the general direction of the gunfire to stop their attackers moving in on them. There was no point in her gang trying to take the initiative; they would be mown down like wild animals.

She swore. 'We have been tricked! They knew we were coming this way!'

Firing a last volley of shots, crouching low, they backed into the forest, then turned and ran. Phoolan forgot all her aches and pains as she stumbled over thick tree roots and pushed through bushes. They ran, it seemed, for miles, but when they paused the gunfire was just as close.

And then she could see them: figures in Khaki uniform. They were everywhere. These were not *baghis*. Too many uniforms. Birds screeched and flew off as shots cut across the natural sounds of the forest. Phoolan Devi and Man Singh were together; they had no idea where the other gang members were although they had to be close by because their guns were still firing. Man and woman ran on, ducking, weaving. It was the first time Phoolan had felt real fear. If they stopped, they would certainly be killed.

They ran for hours, until it was almost too dark to see ahead. The gunfire had ended. Had their pursuers given up? Or was it trickery? Some of their gang had caught up with them, calling out as they approached so as not to be gunned down by mistake. Finally, exhausted, they stopped and threw themselves to the ground. Their bodies throbbed with pain and the sweat poured out of them. Running. She was always running. But it had never been like this.

'Someone has betrayed us,' she said. 'Now I shall never surrender. Never!'

Ghanshyam waited in vain for either Phoolan Devi or his emissaries to come to him. Then he heard about the ambush. Picking up his automatic rifle, he let loose a volley of shots into the earth. A gang member, his elder brother, Karan Singh, suggested they should attack a police station, but Ghanshyam saw no point in it. He seethed with anger. His trust in the police had been abused. He would not, after all surrender.

On the appointed day, Additional Inspector-General Govil travelled to the Samarjeet Inter College in Rampura in case Ghanshyam turned up, although he suspected he would not. His suspicions were confirmed.

At the Bhind police headquarters, Rajendra Chaturvedi was experiencing mixed emotions. He was thankful that the big dacoit with whom he had been negotiating a surrender had not fallen into the hands of the police in Uttar Pradesh; yet he was furious that some apparent double dealing had been going on. He doubted that Ghanshyam would have lived to see through a surrender ceremony. And as far as

Phoolan Devi was concerned, it was common knowledge that many people over the border wanted her dead. They were so damn trigger happy in UP, he thought. Could they not see that every time they fired their rifles at a dacoit they set back negotiations by months, possibly years?

He studied the reports prepared for him by his junior officers. Phoolan Devi had been on her way to meet Ghanshyam when she was ambushed. She had managed to escape, but two of her party had been shot dead. So Phoolan was about to meet Ghanshyam. Could it be, Chaturvedi wondered, that she was planning to turn herself in? He considered the best means of contacting her. She would be full of suspicion and hatred now and it would be difficult to get hold of a go-between. Ghanshyam was an obvious negotiator, but it would not be easy reaching him, either. The problem stayed with Chaturvedi for days until he realised what he must do.

A week later a stranger drove into Gorhapurwa village on a motorcycle. He was completely alone and carried a small bag on his shoulder. The villagers took him to be a journalist because he enquired where Phoolan Devi's parents lived. The visitor was apprehensive and glanced about him before approaching the house. Rajendra Chaturvedi suspected there would be one hell of a stink if the UP authorities knew he was there.

On his return to Bhind he sent out feelers to Ghanshyam. This time, he worked through the dacoit's uncle, who knew where Ghanshyam was, and successfully arranged a meeting in the ravines east of Bhind. Baba Ghanshyam turned up surrounded by his gang. Even though he believed Chaturvedi could be trusted, he was taking no chances.

'I will put it very simply,' said Chaturvedi. 'Come to me. Trust me and surrender to me. I will do what I can to ensure your family are cared for and if Phoolan Devi surrenders, her family will be looked after, too. I have been to see them. I have given them my assurances.'

'You have been into UP?' asked Ghanshyam, incredulously.

Chaturvedi said only, 'Tell Phoolan I would like to talk to her. And the same goes for Muslim.'

Once again the police officer and the bandit chief went their separate ways, Chaturvedi wondering if he was ever going to get anywhere. But at least he was talking to the bandits, whereas the Uttar Pradesh police had burned their boats. It was frustrating having to go about his normal business, but there was no alternative to waiting and hoping. Then he received word through his contact that Ghanshyam wanted to meet him again. Chaturvedi's heart jumped. Something told him he had made progress.

'*Khabar bhejwayi hai* — she has sent news!' Chaturvedi could hardly believe it. The first ever response from Phoolan Devi. Until now, her only messages to the police, written on her behalf by a gang member, had been taunts and abuse.

'She is prepared to give herself up, providing you agree to certain conditions, which she will lay down.'

Chaturvedi held back a smile. He could sense Ghanshyam's hand in this business. The bearded bandit was a stickler for conditions.

'Officially, I cannot promise that any conditions will be met,' said Chaturvedi. 'But you can assure her that her trust in us will not be betrayed.'

Chaturvedi wanted to set off immediately with Ghanshyam and at least position himself closer to Phoolan Devi, for Ghanshyam had confided she was near the Madhya Pradesh border. But he knew that he had to inform his superiors of his progress.

'The next time you contact me,' said Chaturvedi, 'I hope to have received official backing.'

It was to be two weeks before the authority came. The Chief Minister, Mr Arjun Singh, instructed him to continue negotiations on the understanding that Phoolan Devi would be charged with any offences she had committed in Madhya Pradesh. That was all Chaturvedi wanted to hear. As far as was known, she had committed no serious crimes in his state.

On December 2 his contact, Havaldar Bhadoria, met him in Bhind and told him to wait in his office over the next

couple of days. Someone would come and collect him. The next 36 hours were filled with frustration. Chaturvedi was irritable with his family; he fidgeted in his office, reading reports but not taking them in. On the morning of the second day he was quite distracted, looking up sharply whenever anyone entered his office. He began to think Phoolan Devi had reneged on the meeting. But then an unknown man called — a simple villager who bowed at the door and said, 'Sir, I have come for you.' It was after seven o'clock and already dark. Chaturvedi led the man out to his motorcycle and they set off to the east of Bhind.

Rajendra Chaturvedi was about to become the first police officer to come face to face with Phoolan Devi since, as a child, she was accused of stealing from her cousin's house.

While Chaturvedi was engaged in his misty hilltop rendezvous with Phoolan Devi a string of spies were at work. In a busy township like Bhind, it was not difficult. Men sitting around near the police station raised no suspicions. And when the superintendent set off on his motorcycle, a cyclist pedalled behind. It did not matter that he could not keep up. The informer network operated not so much on knowing where people were, but where they were not. Yes, it was established, Chaturvedi had passed one hamlet a few miles from Bhind. Another cyclist set off and checked the next hamlet. When it was discovered he had not passed a certain point, the informer network checked back and ascertained the only side track he could have taken. Chaturvedi, it was learned, had stopped at a village for a while and had then headed east. That was as far as the informers dare take it. They knew approximately where he was going.

Since the massacre at Behmai, Sriram and Lalaram Singh had been combing the ravines for Phoolan Devi, raping and plundering in Mallah villages as they passed through. They behaved like wild animals, for the hatred they felt for Phoolan had displaced any courtesy they might have had. In one village, two residents resisted their demands for valuables. They were shot where they stood and then hacked to pieces

with knives while the gang forced the terrified inhabitants to watch. The limbs and torsos were stuffed into sacks. 'Put them with the rubbish,' sneered Lalaram Singh. That was the way the Singh brothers behaved and these were the men who wanted to get their hands on Phoolan Devi. There wasn't a villager who did not know about the feud that existed between the two gangs. If the two groups met, the Chambal and Yamuna Rivers would run red with blood.

Now the Singh brothers had received word that Phoolan Devi was considering surrender. Their contact in the UP police met them near the Yamuna and put forward what he hoped would be a plan to draw Phoolan from her hiding-place.

'I want you to attack Phoolan's village,' he said. 'It will send her running to her family. And when she comes, we will be waiting for her.'

A week later, the Singh brothers, firing rifles into the air, charged into Gorhapurwa. They used their rifle butts to smash in the men's faces and raped women in front of their husbands. But Phoolan's family were not touched. The brothers wanted Phoolan to come to her relatives' aid. If they were killed or harmed she might consider it too late; there should be only the threat of their being hurt. On the nearby hilltops and in the valleys, scores of armed police waited for the Bandit Queen. They realised it would take perhaps 24 hours for her to reach Gorhapurwa but they were prepared to wait. So were Lalaram and Sriram. They took a family hostage and settled down in a house for the night in the centre of the village.

But Phoolan Devi never came. After three days, the dacoit brothers and the police realised she was not going to turn up. The Thakurs fired their guns, warned the village they would be back, and moved out into the ravines. The police withdrew but the brothers decided to wait around the district in case Phoolan Devi came.

Phoolan's own network of informers was as efficient as those working against her. Someone had managed to sneak away from Gorhapurwa and pass on word about the ambush.

'I should go and help my family,' she said to Man Singh. But he told her to stay.

'You will be shot down the moment you appear. We might kill a few, but in the end we will all die.'

'So they commit more mischief, those brothers. And still I cannot confront them. I cannot surrender until I have seen them squirm at my feet.'

Man Singh shook his head. 'There is too much against you. They will die one day, even if it is not your hand which brings it about.'

Despite the narrow escape she had had while travelling to meet Ghanshyam, Phoolan was strongly considering giving herself up, providing it could be to the Madhya Pradesh authorities. She had heard a great deal about Rajendra Chaturvedi following the surrender of Malkhan Singh. It was true, she considered, that Malkhan had come to no harm. So she had sent word that she would like to meet the police superintendent. He had not tried to trick her when he came and he had not tried to force her hand. But she had to meet him again, before she took it further. She needed certain assurances and so far he had only promised that her family would be safe. It was not enough. There was no point in surrendering if she was going to end up dangling on a noose. Better to die here in her ravines.

Rajendra Chaturvedi responded to her request to meet him again. Once more, he faced a confusing journey through thickets and valleys before he was able to sit with her.

'It is a difficult case,' the Bhind superintendent pointed out. 'All your crimes are in Uttar Pradesh. If you surrender to us there will be big trouble from the UP authorities. However, the Chief Minister has authorised me to continue negotiating with you. We will sort out the problems afterwards. And there will be problems.'

She handed him a sheet of paper on which she had dictated her demands to her literate gang member, Mehndi Hasan. If she surrendered, she would not be hanged nor handed over to the UP police. She would not be handcuffed and any cases pending in UP should be tried at a special court in MP. She

would be kept in an open jail and given all facilities allowed to dacoits who had surrendered before her. Her family would be found new accommodation in MP.

There were to be two more trips to the ravines before Phoolan Devi told Chaturvedi that she was tired of running and that she was ready to surrender.

'I can personally guarantee that your family will be cared for,' he assured her. 'Officially, there can be no other guarantees. Unofficially, you can put your entire trust in me.'

Further south along the Chambal River, near its junction with the Yamuna, Ghanshyam held a conference with Muslim and his gang. He disclosed to Muslim his plans to give up and told him that Phoolan was close to doing the same thing.

'It would be wise, my brother, if you did the same. These valleys are alive with police. I have taken many risks to reach you.'

'I know about the police,' said Muslim. 'We had a shoot-out with a party a few days ago. I think we killed one, but I can't be sure.'

'You will surely die if they surround you.'

Muslim discussed the surrender proposal with his gang. The consensus of opinion was that things were so tight that it was safer to give up. If they were tried in Madhya Pradesh they would do a few years in jail and then go free. There were a number of dacoits, Muslim knew, who had surrendered in 1972 and who were now living in the cities. Muslim told Ghanshyam he would move his gang over the border into Madhya Pradesh and would wait in the forests near Seondha, twelve miles south of Bhind. Muslim drew a map of their proposed hideout so that Ghanshyam could contact him when further progress was made with the surrender negotiations.

Rajendra Chaturvedi was delighted with the progress of the talks. With any luck it would be only a matter of weeks now before the most sought-after gangs in the ravines would be handing in their guns to his Chief Minister.

In Lucknow, the UP Chief Minister, Mr Sripat Mishra,

was furious at the reports that gangs of criminals wanted in his state for atrocities were to be allowed the privilege of handing themselves over to the authorities of another state. His anger went right down the line from the Director-General of Police to the Deputy Inspectors-General, to the superintendents and the patrolmen. The orders were to pull out all stops and sabotage the surrender plan. Phoolan Devi in particular must never be allowed to walk free from the crimes she was responsible for in Uttar Pradesh.

But it was not the Uttar Pradesh police forces who disrupted Rajendra Chaturvedi's plans. For within the ranks of his own officers there was anger that dacoits from another state should be allowed to bring their filthy reputations into Madhya Pradesh. And jealousy. An order was passed down from a senior Madhya Pradesh officer to the Bhind circle inspector and to the officer in charge of the Umaria police station. Muslim, they were told, was in their area. He must be captured dead or alive. Orders like that, of course, gave policemen the right to go in firing. Swarms of armed police spread through the ravines and forests south of Bhind. Across the border, squads of armed constabulary also continued their 24-hour patrols. Any dacoit who raised his — or her — head within a 30-mile radius was likely to get it blown off.

On January 26, 1983, Muslim and his gang were sitting on the edge of the forest eating a meal when a police party from Umaria crept up on them. In the first fusillade of shots Muslim took a bullet in the stomach. He keeled over screaming in pain but was resolute enough to drag himself into the trees. As his gang held the police off, Muslim crawled away on his bloodstained stomach. Incredibly, when the police rushed the forest edge, they were unable to find any of the *baghis*. They followed a bloody trail for 500 yards but then it petered out. A little further on, Muslim was still crawling, refusing help from his gang. 'I am your leader, not a woman!' he gasped out and raised himself to his feet. He staggered on for another five miles, blood running over the hand that clutched his belly, until they came to a village. The inhabitants, who had already been alerted by a dacoit who

had run on ahead, had clean rags, disinfectant and water ready. Before Muslim passed out, he despatched one of his gang to send a message to Chaturvedi.

'Tell Chaturvedi,' he said, 'to prove that he has not betrayed us by getting me to a hospital.'

Chaturvedi was stunned by the news. But there was no time for an inquiry. First, he arranged for Muslim to be brought by jeep to Bhind for immediate treatment and then he got on the telephone to the Chief Minister's office in Bhopal.

'I'm afraid we are going to lose Phoolan Devi after this,' said Chaturvedi after outlining the shooting.

'Any help you want,' said Arjun Singh, 'and I'm right behind you.'

'You and I might want Phoolan alive,' said Chaturvedi. 'But there are a large number of our own officers who do not. If the UP police don't gun her down, our own people will. It's bloody frustrating, I can tell you.'

When Phoolan, camped near Tahangur village in the Bhind district, heard about Muslim's wounding, she screamed her curses through the valley.

'Now I shall personally kill Rajendra Chaturvedi!' she yelled. 'He is a traitor like those fuckers in UP!'

Man Singh kicked in the fire. The news had devastated him, for he too had believed that the Bhind superintendent was to be trusted. They despatched a messenger to Ghanshyam who was hiding out in the Seondha forest. The surrender was off. Shortly after their own man had left for Ghanshyam's encampment, an emissary arrived from Ghanshyam bearing the same message. Ghanshyam was heading back into the ravines on the border.

Rajendra Chaturvedi sat in his office, his head in his hands. Weeks of patient negotiation had been blown by a bunch of trigger-happy cops acting on the orders of a pig-headed official. For God's sake, didn't they know the risks he'd taken? Didn't they appreciate the dangerous temperament of the Bandit Queen? This latest incident could send her off on another rampage of crime. He banged his fist on the desk,

nearly upsetting the tea that had gone cold in the cup beside him. Well, there was only one thing for it, although it was a pretty stupid idea under the circumstances — he would try again. When he told his family, they were appalled.

'If you go back into those ravines after that woman, it will be the last we see of you,' one of his brothers argued. It was no use. Chaturvedi went ahead and sent a message through his go-between.

At the dacoits' encampment, Man Singh waited patiently while Phoolan bullied the messenger, punching him and screeching abuse.

'He wants to come to me again? What will the fucker do this time? Shoot us down from a helicopter? Or blow us up with grenades? Let him show his ass to me and I will blast it off.'

'This man says it was a mistake,' said Man Singh, 'Chaturvedi did not authorise the shooting. He seems to be angry about it. Let him come. Let us hear him.'

A few days later, the motorcycle carrying the superintendent set out again towards the ravines. Once more he was accompanied by a guide, and as before their departure was monitored by informers.

A few hundred yards from the Kunwari River the Bandit Queen stood with her hands on her hips waiting for Chaturvedi's explanation. She was in a bitchy mood and her gang held their rifles at the ready. He didn't like it one bit. But he began, telling of how he had arranged for Muslim to be taken to hospital in a police jeep, first to Bhind and then on to Gwalior where he received further treatment and was now making progress.

'Would I have bothered if I wanted him dead?' the superintendent asked.

It took several hours of careful talk to calm her down.

'I still want you to surrender,' said the policeman. 'As it is, you are caught in a pincer movement. You know they want you in UP, but there are elements within the MP police who want you dead, too. I cannot guarantee your safety for much longer.'

'What about my family?' she snapped. 'You assured me they would be looked after. And they are still in UP, waiting for the police to come and beat shit out of them the moment I surrender to you. I tell you, I will not leave these ravines until my family are brought to me in MP and I can see that they are well.'

'The UP police will not allow them to leave. They know that if they come to MP they will have no hope of catching you.'

'If they won't send them, *you* go and fetch them! Without them, there will be no surrender.'

Man Singh interjected, 'I want my family here, too.'

'And I want my cow and goats,' said Phoolan Devi.

Chaturvedi headed back to Bhind depressed and deflated. It became more difficult every time.

New trouble was brewing. Word spread among police circles that Ghanshyam was in the Seondha forests, south of Bhind. Chaturvedi had already got word to him that the shooting of Muslim was a mistake. Although initially alarmed, Ghanshyam was still prepared to surrender. But his life was in grave danger. Unknown to Chaturvedi, police from the Datia district south of Gwalior were headed into the forests hunting for Ghanshyam. They were within half a day's march when the superintendent heard about the operation. He immediately telephoned the Chief Minister.

'You must intervene,' he urged. 'If they find Ghanshyam they will kill him, and you know what that will mean.'

Shortly afterwards, Chief Minister Singh personally issued a directive to every police circle in the ravine districts: make no attempt to capture dacoits. That order, of course, had no influence on the UP police. Several patrols even crossed the Chambal River a few miles into Madhya Pradesh, such was their determination to nail Phoolan Devi.

In Uttar Pradesh, the authorities, realising that only a few days were left to them, planned desperate measures. Not a single dacoit should be allowed to surrender. As well as enlisting the Singh brothers' help, a cold-blooded killer and gang leader, Jaiveer, was to be afforded police protection so

that he could go to the district and attempt to assassinate Phoolan Devi. Yet another dacoit leader, Surendra, who had wounded Phoolan in the knee, was contacted and given a different assignment — to kidnap Ghanshyam's father. The UP police had considered kidnapping Phoolan's family, but since she had not returned to her village when it was last attacked, the authorities felt she would not reveal herself this time either, even if her family were taken hostage. Ghanshyam on the other hand had a close affinity with his parents. If they were kidnapped, it was considered, he would come out of hiding to try to rescue them. Surendra was a perfect choice for the kidnapping, for he held an old grudge against Ghanshyam for kidnapping one of his relatives.

While Jaiveer made his way into the ravines in the Bhind district, Surendra's gang charged into Hanumangarhi village and pushed a rifle under the nose of Bhogi Ram, Ghanshyam's father. He was taken to a camp in the ravines where Surendra Singh threw him to the ground and told him what they wanted. His gang were short of money and weapons. Bhogi Ram's son would be able to help them, but they had had trouble locating him. They wanted Bhogi Ram to take them to Ghanshyam so that the request could be made personally. Bhogi Ram held out his hands. 'I don't know where my son is hiding,' he said.

'In that case,' said Surendra Singh, 'I doubt whether you will ever see your family again.'

Phoolan Devi, meanwhile, had taken shelter in the village of Khodan, some twenty miles from Bhind. She sat in a small house with Man Singh and six of the gang. One of the dacoits, Vishnu, had dared to argue with her.

'I do not want to surrender — do you think I want to be shot down like Chhabiram?'

'I will not order you to give yourself up,' said the Bandit Queen. 'But if you are captured, you will say nothing about the time you have spent with me. If you do, I will find out and even from jail I will have you shot.'

Vishnu finished his meal and left with two other members. He was going to form his own gang. Phoolan was still left with

eleven men, including Man Singh. 'He is a fool,' she said. 'He will not last.'

That night, as Khodan village slept, Jaiveer and his men moved in on their assassination mission. From their positions on the village outskirts they could see the glow of oil lamps in some of the houses. Jaiveer knew that his target was in there somewhere, probably sleeping. Or perhaps screwing. That would be a fine way of finishing off the whore of the valleys. But he did not know in which house. Should he rush the village and smash in doors hoping to catch her unawares? Or sneak into one home and force the family to tell him where Phoolan Devi lay? It was a risky business either way, for he did not know how many men the Bandit Queen had with her. He decided it was safer to go for one house, and if the residents could not or would not help, go to the next.

They stole up the track, fifteen men, rifles loaded, the older weapons with hammers cocked. Jaiveer knew about this woman's remarkable ability to escape. But this time she would have no chance. Then the unforeseen happened. One of the gang tripped. As he fell, his finger tightened on the trigger and his gun exploded. Almost immediately there was a return of rifle fire from the hillocks overlooking the path from Phoolan's guards. One of the intruders screamed as a bullet struck him in the shoulder. The astonished Jaiveer fired his rifle wildly at the hills before realising that an assassination was impossible. He yelled to his men to retreat — but they were already running back into the ravines. Straight into the arms of a Madhya Pradesh police patrol. In an exchange of fire, one of the dacoits was killed. The rest managed to escape.

Awakened by the firing, Phoolan Devi and Man Singh had grabbed their rifles and gone to the window of the house. Shouting his name, Munna, one of her own men, came running from the track.

'They were *baghis*. We do not know who. But they were not police.'

Phoolan sank down behind the wall and put her hands to her forehead, her left hand rubbing the fish-stone ring on the

middle finger of her right hand. She was trembling violently, from exhaustion, not fear.

'After they have brought my family to me,' she said to her lover, 'I will hand in my rifle.'

That daring operation was already under way. Rajendra Chaturvedi had carefully considered the situation. Unless they knew their families were safe, Phoolan Devi and Man Singh would not surrender. He could not request the UP authorities to bring the relatives over. Neither, he felt, could his state government officially sanction an incursion into another state.

Chaturvedi realised he would have to take matters into his own hands. It was results he wanted, and sometimes you had to bend the rules to achieve them. He sent a man he could trust to Gorhapurwa village. Phoolan's parents were told to get all the family together and be prepared to leave home immediately.

Meanwhile, Ghanshyam's father had been unexpectedly released by the Surendra gang. It was obvious that Ghanshyam was not going to 'take the bait' as the UP authorities had expected. Frustrated, the Director-General of Uttar Pradesh, Mr S. C. Dixit, found himself under fire from the press. Word had got around that he had ordered the raid on Phoolan's village and that his subordinates had arranged the kidnapping of Ghanshyam's father. He had to call a hurried press conference to deny the accusations officially.

'Any criminal who wants to surrender before the law is quite free to do so,' said the police chief. 'Of course, the government does not want to make a hero out of a bandit, but at the same time we would not harm one unless he pulled the trigger first. Phoolan Devi still has a chance to surrender to us. We have more than 40 companies of police out in the dacoit-infested districts and she can surrender to any one of them.'

Just a few days after Mr Dixit's denials of underhand methods and yet more assurances that everything was being done to capture Phoolan Devi, another horrifying massacre

occurred just 22 miles from Etawah. It was to create a furore, not only because it happened in the heart of territory being patrolled by police but because it sparked off yet more serious allegations against local police officials.

At nine in the evening on February 1 Gyan Singh, a 60-year-old Thakur, was dragged from his bed in Kachchpura village by Nekse, a notorious Brahmin dacoit known for his antipathy towards Thakurs, and shot dead. Nekse's gang then hauled five children from the house, along with Gyan Singh's daughter-in-law, Rani. They were ordered to sit in the courtyard while the invaders smashed in another door and dragged out the dead man's widowed sister, Chhoti Bitiya, and his younger son, Sant.

'Where are the *maal* (valuables)?' demanded a dacoit, who proceeded to punch and kick Chhoti Bitiya mercilessly before she handed over the keys to the safe. The dacoits took one kilogram of gold, three kilograms of silver and 12,000 rupees in cash which the family had raised from selling their mustard crop. Then the killings began.

First, they shot Chhoti Bitiya. Then Rani was ordered to take her eighteen-month-old son into her arms and they were killed. Sant was the next victim. Gyan Singh's wife, Parvati, and his 65-year-old cousin, Sirdar, watched the spectacle, horrified. Three remaining children, Surendra, thirteen, Virendra, eleven, and Gudda, seven, were then herded out of the house.

'Where are you taking them?' asked Parvati.

'We will hold them for ransom,' said one of the dacoits.

But they pushed the children into the courtyard and shot them, too.

'I am Nekse, and don't you dare hold anyone else responsible for this,' said the leader of the gang to the survivors. As the dacoits headed off towards the Yamuna River, barking dogs pursued them. The gang turned on the animals and shot them as well.

There was something of Behmai in the events surrounding this shameful incident. For villagers who ran seeking help to a nearby PAC post, received no response. This indifference

was to spark off serious allegations against the police, particularly Senior Superintendent Prem Dutt Raturi, who had taken charge of Etawah in 1980. A Brahmin, Raturi was accused by villagers and local politicians of giving patronage to Brahmin criminals, including Nekse. Mr Mulayam Singh Yadav, Lok Dal leader of the opposition in the UP Assembly, accused the senior superintendent in a written statement of 'attacking and liquidating' his party workers. Raturi's credibility was undermined by an official note he had prepared a few days before the carnage, in which he wrote: 'The law and order problems of this district are well under control. There is a definite feeling of security at present in the minds of the people.'

Despite a statement by Gyan Singh's widow, Parvati, that Nekse was the gang leader in charge of the massacre, Deputy Superintendent Chaturvedi of Etawah (no relation to Rajendra Chaturvedi) was at pains to argue that the dacoit was not involved in the crime. As one opposition member pointed out, 'Bandits are running around freely and the cops are turning a blind eye because some dacoits enjoy the ruling party's support!'

Gyan Singh's son, Rajbir, was offered 40,000 rupees compensation but he refused to accept it, saying, 'How can I be sure that when I take the money, the dacoits will not kill me for that amount?' There were fears among villagers that Rajbir himself might become a dacoit to avenge his family's massacre. One visitor to his village observed, 'If he does become a bandit, it will be another case of an apathetic administration driving a man towards a permanent life of crime.'

Nothing seemed to have changed over the centuries from those days when gangs enjoyed the patronage of the local rulers.

An old truck lurched onto the main road, packed with men, women and children who looked like the farm workers found throughout the villages of the ravines. The vehicle had no room to spare, for as well as its human load, two goats and a

large white cow bleated and bellowed their protests at the rolling motion of the lorry as it veered and crashed into potholes. Near to Moth village, two members of the Uttar Pradesh Police Armed Constabulary stepped out in front of the vehicle and waved it to a halt.

'Where are you going?'

'To the market at Jhansi.'

The driver and his companion gave names and a village and then the police examined their passengers. They were searching for Phoolan Devi, but no-one in the back matched any description of the wanted woman. Satisfied, the police let them pass, along with two jeeps that were right behind.

When the vehicles were safely over the border into Madhya Pradesh, Rajendra Chaturvedi, at the wheel of one of the jeeps, took his eyes off the road for a moment and grinned at Inspector Chandah Singh Nagar.

'Bloody good, heh?'

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ALTHOUGH PHOOLAN DEVI'S family had been 'rescued' from the Uttar Pradesh police, Man Singh's relatives still had to be brought across the border. The following day, five men, accompanied by a sub-inspector from Bhind, drove into the Jalaun district of Uttar Pradesh with the intention of picking them up. But it was too much to expect this operation to run smoothly.

Livid that Phoolan's kin had been snatched from under their noses, a contingent of UP police staked out her lover's family home in anticipation of his relatives' departure. Their suspicions were confirmed when two jeeps filled with men pulled into the village. Immediately, the Uttar Pradesh officers acted. They surrounded their counterparts who, panic-stricken, abandoned the operation and drove off at high speed straight through a UP cordon. The episode that followed was to cause an uproar in the Parliaments of both states. For a Madhya Pradesh policeman turned his rifle on the Uttar Pradesh officers, hitting one of their vehicles. Their colleagues retaliated violently and a desperate chase followed, guns blazing, before the MP police were stopped, arrested, taken to jail and charged with kidnapping! Furthermore, learning that Rajendra Chaturvedi was behind the transfer of Phoolan's family, the UP government registered a case of kidnapping against him, too, through the Kalpi police station.

When it was established that shots had been fired by the MP police at their inter-state colleagues, the UP Parliament

erupted. The angry opposition was hardly pacified when Mr Ammar Razvi, Minister for Parliamentary Affairs, said that the fullest inquiry would be conducted.

'Dacoits have no confidence in the UP police!' an angry politician shouted.

'I am delighted to receive such news,' Razvi replied sarcastically. 'But I tell you that if criminals have faith in the police force of another state, it is a sad reflection on the integrity of that force.'

Mr Razvi pointed out that if bandits were going to other states offering to surrender, it was because pressure had been mounted on them and they did not feel safe in UP territory, which had become 'too hot' for them. Shankar Singh, who represented the Kalpi constituency, told the Parliament that as a result of the arrest of the six police from Bhind, people in Jalaun were terror-stricken. They feared reprisals by the MP police.

While the political attacks against the Madhya Pradesh police appeared justified, the UP authorities were feeling decidedly uncomfortable about yet another instance of their own police losing control. On January 25, a lawyer in the eastern town of Azamgarh had refused to give a bribe to a police prosecutor in order to obtain bail for five clients. An argument ensued and as lawyers, litigants and court employees gathered to watch, more police arrived to help their colleague. Then 50 others turned up, armed with batons. They had parked their vehicles across the court's two main gates and on entering the courthouse immediately began indiscriminately to beat up lawyers, distinguishable by their white shirts and black coats. When the District Judge, Ram Kumar Saxena, was called to the scene some police turned on him as well and were about to beat him when the judge's secretary stepped in. Finally the judge, standing amid pools of blood, managed to persuade the police to stop.

As a result of the fracas, lawyers called a general strike for February 4, deciding to hold a peaceful protest that same day in the Bar Association compound on the court premises. The strike was very effective, with students taking up the lawyers'

cause and holding up the town's bus services. At that, the district authorities decided to show their strength. While the protest meeting was in progress, the police arrived. Senior lawyer Ram Sringar Rai described what happened next:

'The police went berserk, breaking a large number of chairs, destroying advocates' cars, scooters and motorcycles parked on the premises and beating up defenceless lawyers ... Policemen pulled out case files from lawyers' chambers and tore them into pieces in utter frenzy. Many of us were lucky to have been able to lock ourselves inside the library to save ourselves from reckless beating by *lathi*-wielding policemen.'

Before the dispute was smoothed out, 80 per cent of the state's courts were at a standstill and the seven-month-old government of Mr Shripat Mishra faced severe criticism from its opponents. The police, of course, did not escape. Mr L. P. Naithani, convenor with the People's Union for Civil Liberties, pointed out that the police had misused their power and had taken the law into their hands in dealing with a situation that could have been tackled by legal methods. 'We need a change in the police system to prevent such incidents from occurring with predictable regularity, as is the case today,' he said.

Another observer commented, 'The police are known to have perpetrated graver brutalities in various parts of the country. Viewed in that context, what happened in Azamgarh is only a minor symptom of a deep-rooted disease.'

With so many problems within the police force, it was not surprising that dacoits had had such a free run. And that those who became trapped in the police net rarely lived to see the inside of a courtroom.

In Madhya Pradesh, Rajendra Chaturvedi was naturally concerned about the storm raging around him in the wake of the 'kidnappings' of Phoolan Devi's relatives, but he could not permit it to influence his intentions. He held firmly to his belief that giving dacoits an alternative to certain death in a shoot-out was a more effective way of clearing up the bandit problem.

He had one more trip to make into the ravines: to Khodan

village. Phoolan's family had stayed at Chaturvedi's Bhind residence before being transported to Khodan. The white cow remained at Bhind. Now the superintendent was on his way to Khodan, at the head of a convoy of jeeps that set out at midnight on February 9. This journey would have to be his last effort to persuade the dacoit to give herself up. His government had given him just three more days to effect a surrender. Too many problems were brewing up with the Uttar Pradesh Government. If she did not surrender, said instructions from Bhopal, she should be forcibly arrested or chased back over the border. So this midnight trip was vital, not only for the Bandit Queen but for the superintendent who had spent so many patient hours negotiating with her.

It was bitterly cold, and although they wore overcoats and monkey caps, the superintendent suggested to his men that they carry extra blankets. He had learned from experience how bone-chilling a furtive rendezvous could be. Shortly after one-thirty the vehicles swung off the highway and took the bumpy track to Khodan, stopping just on the outskirts of the village. They had travelled the last few hundred yards in pitch darkness — Chaturvedi took no chances and had ordered the drivers to switch off their lights. Their destination was a small police post from which a man emerged with a whispered message for the senior officer: he was to wait for half an hour before following the route taken by the 'contact'.

After a freezing 30 minutes, they started walking along a path, glad of the blankets wrapped tightly around their shoulders. It was close to three when Chaturvedi and his men reached a small house. The front door was slightly ajar and in the faint light of an oil lamp the police saw the barrel of a gun pointing straight at them.

'Enter!' A man's voice whispered from inside.

Chaturvedi and his companions walked through — and found themselves surrounded by five armed men. The superintendent recognised them immediately. They were Phoolan Devi's most trusted henchmen and had been present at each of his meetings with her. He knew that any one of

these five would not hesitate to pull the trigger. They nodded an acknowledgement and began a thorough search of the visitors. No sooner had they ensured that the police contingent were unarmed than another door swung open and Phoolan Devi entered.

She stood small and straight in blue jeans and khaki pullover and as her proud bright eyes swept over the police group she said simply, '*Ab namare saath koyisurrender kare va na kare, ham karenge.* Even if no-one else surrenders with me, I will.'

The news that the Bandit Queen was to hand over her gun within 48 hours spread rapidly throughout the country. 'An embodiment of the legend is almost the last thing we expected,' a woman magazine columnist observed in Delhi.

The following morning, Phoolan Devi was transferred under heavy guard to the village of Inguie, 40 miles away, where she, her gang, Ghanshyam and his gang who had come in from the ravines, and her family were put up at an irrigation department rest-house. Because of the large number of dacoits and relatives, tents were erected in the grounds. There was a carnival atmosphere, all bustle and noise. Strollers roamed between groups squatting around small open fires. Here, someone was poking the embers, there a woman stirred a pot. High, shrill chatter and sporadic hoots of laughter spilled into the air. Ghanshyam had turned up in police uniform, over which he had hung a garland of flowers, a *rudraksha mala*. Someone said his countenance typified a man in communion with God.

This was more than could be said about Phoolan Devi. She was fuming, and Man Singh was angry, that, far from his family being brought into Madhya Pradesh, they had been arrested by the UP police along with the MP police who had tried to collect them. Locked in a room with Rajendra Chaturvedi, she spat at him and shouted, 'You want me to surrender tomorrow? You can stick that idea up your ass! You have broken your promise.'

He was with her for more than three hours and when he emerged, his face drawn, he said, 'God spare me from women and their tantrums.'

When at last Phoolan Devi came out with Man Singh a photographer tried to take her picture. She swore crudely and flew at him, swinging her fists. Man Singh also went for the unfortunate man and tried to open the camera to remove the film. The photographer grabbed his camera and fled.

Phoolan had agreed to go ahead with the surrender, but a new condition had been put forward: she and her gang would have to be dressed in police uniforms. It meant that Chaturvedi had to organise a team of tailors and now they worked furiously into the night, taking measurements and cutting and sewing cloth by the light of fires and hurricane lamps. The surrender ceremony was to take place at nine o'clock the following morning. The tailors had many hours of work ahead of them. At one o'clock, Man Singh was called for a fitting. As soon as he put the shirt on he turned angrily on the tailor.

'What is this? I asked for long sleeves! These are short!'

One of Chaturvedi's subordinates tried to reason with him. 'These are proper uniforms. Most of us prefer them when the sun is high.'

But Man Singh would not hear of it. For him, it was long sleeves or nothing. The tailor pulled out another roll of cloth. In one of the rest-house rooms, a police typist drew up a list of all those surrendering and the weapons they were handing in. As the night grew colder, Phoolan's mother and youngest sister, Munni, huddled closer to a fire. Somebody asked Moola why Phoolan was so touchy this night.

'She is worried,' said Moola, 'that the police may be trying to fool her. She thinks they may be trying to take her in only because they want to hang her. She's upset. She feels it would be better for her to shoot herself.' Moola spat into the fire. 'I don't blame her for not trusting the police. I don't. They have been to our house over and over again and torn everything down. They have even beaten up my little Munni and she is only nine years old.'

Moola was asked if any force had been used to bring the family to Madhya Pradesh.

'We were not forced by anyone. We would like to stay here now. I think we can manage to live by doing any type of work. To go back to UP now would mean great trouble for us. When Phoolan was first kidnapped by dacoits they refused to register my case and then started harassing us. We were frequently beaten up and I was once jailed, all because our daughter was kidnapped by dacoits and fell into their ways.'

Other visitors were talking to Ghanshyam and his gang by the flickering firelight. Ghanshyam's elder brother, Karan Singh, a tall, bewhiskered man in an Uttar Pradesh police uniform, remembered taking to the ravines in 1974 to join his younger brother. The local priest in his village, in collusion with the head man, had taken over the family property. Calling in the help of Ghanshyam, Karan had killed the priest. They had eventually joined Malkhan Singh's gang, Karan recalled, but later Ghanshyam had struck out and formed his own gang, with Karan his most faithful supporter.

Ghanshyam remembered frequently going without food for four days or more. 'We have had enough of it,' he said. 'Enough of that life. We are going to become normal human beings.'

Among his surrendering gang were a pockmarked woman dacoit, Munni Bai, and her husband Babu Khan. They had become *baghis* after being accused by a village elder of committing murder. 'It was our circumstances that led us to this life,' she said. 'For five years we had no home and the only objects of worship we knew were our weapons. Now, even if we are in jail, we can do what we like. The running is over.'

The campfires died and the hurricane lamps in the rest-house went out. Dacoits, relatives, police and government officials were at last settling down for a few hours' sleep. But for Rajendra Chaturvedi it was not to be. A voice was whispering in his ear.

'Wake, sir! Wake!'

The superintendent's eyes sprang open. He found himself

staring into the huge bearded face of Ghanshyam. Startled, he sat up, rubbing his gritty eyes.

'Sir, Phoolan is planning to run away. She doesn't trust anybody. If you allow her to go to the fields, she will flee.'

Extra guards were posted around the enclosure where the tents had been erected. And at dawn, when Phoolan wanted to go to the lavatory, she was escorted to the one in the guest-house instead of being allowed to use a field. Ghanshyam, meanwhile, wanted to look his smartest for the ceremony. He and his gang washed and scrubbed themselves and greased down their hair. Then they put on their fresh police uniforms and daubed red *tilaks* on their foreheads. The dacoit leader and his second-in-command wanted to wear stars of rank, so the police tailors had to push holes into the epaulettes. But Phoolan did not hurry. She told Man Singh that she was still not sure about the wisdom of surrendering. Then she agreed to travel to Bhind, but said she would not wear anything other than her blue jeans and beige sweater.

The two buses that were to take the dacoits to Bhind arrived, all washed and polished. Then Ghanshyam protested: he and his gang would not travel without their weapons. Rajendra Chaturvedi tore his hair, then ordered the weapons to be brought to the gang. They were fetched from a police van and handed out to the dacoits.

Phoolan Devi had now been persuaded to put on her uniform. She kept on her red headband and wore a dagger in a blue sheath at her side. Then to shouts of *'Jai Durga Mata'* and *'Jai Phoolan Devi'*, the buses set off on the road to Bhind. But there was to be another crisis — Ghanshyam insisted on stopping at a temple of Siva. He and his gang sat on the ground at the temple entrance and fired hundreds of rounds into the air as a farewell ceremony. Watching this from her bus, Phoolan turned angrily to Rajendra Chaturvedi.

'Where are my guns?' she demanded. 'I want our guns! You have insulted me by denying me my weapons.'

Chaturvedi tried to explain they were now locked away in a police van. He did not reveal that he dare not give her a loaded gun in the mood she was in.

'And Baba Ghanshyam has better weapons. How can I, Phoolan Devi, surrender with lesser guns?'

She cursed and swore for the rest of the journey. As they approached the outskirts of the town, Chaturvedi watched a speck in the sky grow larger and then descend. It was the Chief Minister's helicopter. The timing was perfect.

For Arjun Singh, the Chief Minister, it was a memorable occasion, if a little ironic. While he had nothing but praise for the efforts of Chaturvedi the superintendent, he was angry and embarrassed by the activities of one of his ministers, also called Chaturvedi. The Deputy Minister for Major and Medium Irrigation in the Madhya Pradesh cabinet, Satyavrat Chaturvedi, had just been sentenced to three years' 'rigorous imprisonment' for a dacoit-style crime. He and five armed accomplices had been found guilty of rioting and kidnapping in a case in which a villager had been taken from his home to settle a land dispute. Some time later, a head constable heard gunshots and, rushing to investigate, found five men standing guard over the villager, who had had every bone in his body broken. While being taken to hospital the dying man said that Chaturvedi had been with the men when he was beaten up.

The revelation that there was a common criminal in his council of ministers came as a great shock to Arjun Singh and he was more than grateful that another government official named Chaturvedi was now going to snatch the limelight by bringing in the most wanted dacoit of them all.

In the dusty, sunwashed grounds of the Maharaja Jiyaji Rao Scindia College below the Chief Minister's helicopter, a crowd of some 7,000 had gathered to witness the surrender ceremony. Arjun Singh beamed. To have negotiated her surrender in his state was indeed a coup. As his helicopter dropped towards the college, he saw the upturned faces of the crowd, the waving hands. But the Chief Minister failed to notice among that sea of arms the angry, shaking fists. For factions of the crowd were furious that a woman who had shaped a terrible reputation in another state should be welcomed to Madhya Pradesh and treated like a heroine. A

platform 23 feet high, had been built for the surrender ceremony, and portraits of Mahatma Gandhi and the Goddess Durga had been placed near the microphones at the dacoits' request.

As the helicopter fluttered down, the dacoits were led into a classroom to await the start of proceedings. There, they were handed new shoes and socks to go with their police uniforms. Phoolan Devi was given a pair of North Star running shoes. But then there was more trouble — one of Ghanshyam's gang pointed out a sub-inspector who had led the police party that had attacked and injured Muslim. His presence caused great agitation and he had to be removed by his superiors.

At last, the ceremony was ready to get under way. The dacoits, all now carrying their weapons, lined up beside the platform. Rajendra Chaturvedi stepped forward to the microphone and told the crowd: 'We will begin today's ceremony with the surrender of gang IR76 of dacoit Phoolan Devi, daughter of Devidin, resident of Gorhapurwa; district, Jalaun.'

As he spoke, the Bandit Queen stepped onto the platform, a red shawl draped over her uniform, and placed her .315 Mauser before the portraits of Gandhi and the Goddess Durga. She removed her ammunition belt and placed it beside the rifle. Then she turned to the Chief Minister, touched his feet and stood to face the crowd, placing her hands together and raising them high. Immediately, some in the audience began to voice their protests. Stones were thrown at the platform and one man screamed, '*Goli ke badle goli. Daku ko hero baate ho. Churiyan pehan ke behto*. A bullet for a bullet. You are making heroes of dacoits. Why don't you wear bangles and sit at home?'

He was pounced upon by police and carried away, but now the crowd was growing restless because cameramen were blocking their view of the woman dacoit. Behind Phoolan Devi came seven members of her gang, who also laid down their arms and bowed at the feet of the Chief Minister as the crowd either cheered or roared their disapproval. Phoolan

Devi placed a yellow garland over the shoulders of the Chief Minister, then turned and raised her arms again. As Ghanshyam's gang went through the same procedures, police closed in on the crowd, fearing that many were about to charge the platform. When the Director-General of Madhya Pradesh police, Mr S. P. Dube, rose to speak there were shouts of '*murdabad*'. Then a young man, identified later as B. S. Yadav, a local political activist, dashed past the police cordon, scrambled onto the dais, grabbed the microphone and, voicing his disapproval of the ceremony, said the state government were 'lionising thugs' and claimed some policemen had made money from the surrender.

'This is not the surrender of the dacoits, but that of the Chief Minister,' he declared.

Security men grabbed him and started beating him with their batons. When a New Delhi photographer tried to take a picture he, too, was beaten up. A government official who went to the photographer's aid was also set upon by police. Amidst the confusion, members of a students' union threw broken bangles at the dais as a protest against government incompetence — dacoits who murdered, they said, should be gunned down on sight.

But the Chief Minister, in a brief speech, told the crowd: 'We don't believe in fake encounters or killing dacoits deceptively. These things are an outcome of a society that believes in revenge and terror. We plan to develop the area and the legends of progress will soon replace those of blood and terror.'

For the Indian press, it was their first glimpse of what one magazine was to describe as 'this sad, wasted creature who was capable of large-scale butchery, countless kidnappings and deliberate instances of cold-blooded murder'. Reporters clamoured around Phoolan Devi as she was led to the bus that was to take her and her gang to Gwalior Jail. Why had she surrendered in Madhya Pradesh? someone managed to ask her.

'What better treatment can you expect from those who stripped Meera Thakur naked and perpetrated all sorts of insults on her?' she snapped.

What of Behmai? What did she have to say about that?

'Have the Thakurs come out of your ass, that you are so concerned about them?' she said angrily. Her violent reaction outraged the sensibilities of the high-caste journalists from the city, yet one writer overlooked her vile language to comment later:

'There are any number of village women who use as crude language, are equally wanton, but who pick up a threatening sickle the moment someone tries to be fresh. Phoolan, indeed, is nothing extraordinary, except that unlike most rural women, she refused to give in to age-old oppressive social norms. She protested against the abuse of her body and the snatching of her father's land. What is amazing is that after living in dense jungles for nearly 36 months and after being on the run from the police of two states, she shows no mental fatigue. Like the legendary Cat Ballou, she has behaved most collectedly, even while caught between a pincer movement by police battalions.'

Another writer observed, 'If there ever had been any trace of beauty in the woman, it has been eaten away.'

Back in the bus, Phoolan Devi stared out at the huge crowd which had gathered to take one last look at her. She held her chin high and turned away. The engine started and the vehicle moved off. For the Bandit Queen, it was the end of the road.

# *Chapter Fifteen*

FROM THE JAIL you can see the fort where the Rani of Jhansi — the Joan of Arc of India — made her last stand against the British during the Indian Mutiny. Dressed as a man, she rode out from the ancient stronghold in June 1858, her horse's reins held in her mouth so that she could swing her sword with both hands. She died in the saddle. At her first home, the fort at Jhansi, 75 miles south-east, a room has been set aside as a shrine of Indian Independence.

The jail stands just above Gwalior plain where the British troops made their encampment. Horses still trot across it, but instead of pulling gun carriages they are now harnessed to small carts laden with villagers and agricultural produce. To reach the prison, you must first negotiate a maze of narrow, potholed streets, ringing with activity and noise. Vehicles and animals are all over the place and hundreds of people throng the jumble of shops that line the route. Every type of business is to be found: food stalls, fabric shops, stores specialising in saris, copper and brass dealers, grocers, jewellers, grain merchants, footwear shops, fruit and vegetable vendors and leatherworkers.

Behind the red steel door of Gwalior Jail, the woman dacoit about whose exploits all India still talks idles away the days. She has just been sentenced to four years by a Madhya Pradesh court for illegal arms possession. When other charges have been heard, she faces ten years or more in prison. If she is extradited to Uttar Pradesh and she is found guilty of murder charges, she faces execution. Chaturvedi's

assurances hold good only in Madhya Pradesh.

Phoolan Devi wears a light blue safari suit, two bronze amulets, a silver necklace and glass bangles given to her by a relative of the Minister of Jails. She loves jewellery and also wears a ring on her toe, an indication that she is married. These personal items aside, she still has little more than when she ruled the ravines of the Chambal and Bundelkhand as the Bandit Queen.

Her room in the barracks contains a mattress on the floor, an electric heater, and pots and pans. A corner is stained red with spittle — she chews betel nut all day. From another part of the jail, groups of dacoits can be heard singing *bhajans*. Malkhan Singh and some of his gang are busy with wood and stone building a temple, and relatives come and go with baskets of food.

When Phoolan Devi arrived, police, government officials and Indian journalists fired questions at her. Some she freely answered. Others she ignored at signals from Man Singh, who sat in on the interviews. On the record, she would say little about the Behmai massacre and other crimes attributed to her.

*Why did you take your gang to Behmai?*

'What should I say? What can I say? We all had to take revenge for what Lalaram and Sriram had done. For many days after they killed Vikram they did *mazak* with me.'

*What do you think about the Thakurs of Behmai?*

'They're dogs. Dirty dogs. I won't say more.'

*Why did you surrender to the Madhya Pradesh police?*

'The Uttar Pradesh police would have thrashed us to pulp in revenge.'

*Did the UP police try to stop you surrendering?*

'Yes — and they would not have taken me alive. They would have killed me and then displayed my body.'

*Why do you say this?*

'The UP police have been in league with Sriram and Lalaram to have me and my men killed. Their latest plan was to sandwich me between their gang from one side while the police would have moved in from the other. Lalaram and

Sriram have even killed three policemen and two inspectors. They have chopped up people with axes and stuffed the dismembered bodies in bags for disposal.'

*Why are they against you?*

'Because they were against my man, Vikram Mallah. They made him unconscious while he was asleep. They put a handkerchief soaked in chloroform over his nose. When he became unconscious, they killed him.'

*How did you manage to continually evade the police?*

'Maalik (God) has saved me. The saviour is always bigger than the killer.'

*At one time there was a force of about 2000 policemen after you.*

'2000? I was told at Gulauri, where five people were killed, that the force there was about 10,000 men.'

*Why did you become a dacoit?*

'I blame it on my cousin Maiyadan, whose false charges drove me into this life. Muslim told me earlier that without killing my enemies, I should not surrender. Then Sahah (Rajendra Chaturvedi) met me and persuaded me. Otherwise I would have hunted Maiyadan down along with Lalaram and Sriram.'

*If you were released, would you go back to Uttar Pradesh?*

'Only my dead body will go to UP! But at this moment I have nothing, not even enough money to buy poison to kill myself. Even surrendering to the MP police ... I felt I would prefer death to surrender.'

*You would rather commit suicide than be taken to Uttar Pradesh?*

'I am not afraid to die in a fight. But I will not let them shoot me down like a dog. You see that *peepal* tree? I would rather hang myself from that.'

*If you could go free and be safe, what would you wish for?*

'If I had the money, I would build a house with rooms as large as the hall in this prison. But I know this is all a dream. What do I know, except cutting grass and using the rifle? If any woman were to go through my experience then she, too, would not be able to think of a normal life.'

*Have you known fear?*

'Every day I have lived with fear. I knew fear on that first night when Vikram came for me and there was talk of killing me. Twice in the jungle I knew fear, also. I was asleep and felt something lashing my face. I reached out and grabbed it. It was the tail of a panther. He ran away. The other time was when we were sitting at our *dera* (camping place) and I suddenly found something slithering on my thighs. The light from the camp fire was dim and I thought one of the men was trying to joke with me. I thought he had thrown a rope at me. Then I realised it was a snake. I quickly picked it up and threw it aside. I thought it was an *ashubh* (ill omen) and we picked up our guns and ran. Ten minutes from the camping place we saw the lights of a very strong police contingent. God sends his own signals. My surrender is not out of fear but because the little lady of my dreams asked me to do it.'

*You must fear the police, otherwise you would not be afraid to surrender in Uttar Pradesh.*

'Afraid of the police? The UP police? Let them face me man to man. I am not afraid of death. They are the most corrupt force in India. They never keep their word. Look what they did to Chhabiram. They shot him after he had surrendered. We are supposed to be without morals, but what about that gang of raping monsters? The MP police never betray you once they have promised something. The UP police are *gaddar*. How can anyone trust them after what they did to Chhabiram?'

*You sound bitter.*

'Today I am a criminal who should be hanged. But what happened when I was abducted and raped? Where were the police then? I had gone to the police on the day of my abduction to ask for protection, yet today the policemen are officers and Phoolan Devi a murderer.'

*What was life like in the ravines?*

'I do not have the words to tell what it was like. Few people will ever be able to understand it. You have to live there to know. We used to walk twelve to fifteen *khos* (about 25 miles)

every day. There was no peace or fixed routine for eating or sleeping. If we were hungry, we would go into a village with our *lathis* and come away with about four days' food. Sometimes we paid for what we took. We used to sleep in the open, wrapped in a tarpaulin sheet, even during the monsoon. We were careful to eat mainly at night. We knew the police could tell where we were by watching for the kites which would circle over us. We had to be careful about smoke, too, and all fires at night had to be kept low.'

*Was it the hard life or police pressure that led to your surrender?*

'I told you, I am not afraid of the police. Life was hard. But it has always been hard. It was Bhagwati Mata who really made me give up. She told me to do it.'

*How many crimes have you committed?*

'I cannot remember. I do not know how many people I have kidnapped or how many dacoities I have committed.'

*Every time you committed a crime, the police were after you. Were there many narrow escapes?*

'Sometimes they passed right by us. But I was safe, due to the benevolence of Bhagwati Mata.'

*Where have you been for the past two years?*

'I have been to Raxaul and I have spent seven to ten days in all districts from Jhansi to the Nepal border. I have been in all the districts of UP through which the Yamuna flows. I have spent a long time just travelling the Yamuna ravines. The police owe me a lot of shoes.'

*Because of all the running you have done?*

'No, because I left my shoes behind. I have a habit of casting them off whenever I sit down. I am a woman of the village and shoes restrict me but in the ravines I must wear them because of the thorns. Every time the police encircled us, I would have to leave my shoes behind to take up position. Sometimes I thought of going back to recover my shoes, but then I decided against it. Let the police wear Phoolan's shoes.'

*Where did you get your shoes?*

'From villages. I asked for shoes and people gave them.'

*Wasn't that like begging?*

'Dacoits and beggars are the same.'

*How long do you think you could have lasted if you had not surrendered?*

'We all have to die some day or other. Who knows when we will die?'

*What was the closest you came to death?*

'Every day I was close to death. One bullet would have done it and they fired hundreds at me. Once we were attacked by Surendra. I was hurt here on my knee and came to Gwalior for medical treatment. I moved about without anyone recognising me. I have been to many big towns while on the run. Nobody knew who I was. Nobody had a picture of me.'

*How did you manage to be accepted as a leader by the men in the gang?*

'Isn't this country being led by a woman?'

*There is a rumour around that you paid 200,000 rupees to be allowed to surrender safely.*

'Ha! Would I be here if I had that much money? I would have veiled my face, taken Man Singh along and gone to live in Bombay.'

*Did you give money to the UP police to survive there for so long?*

'If I had met any of them, they would have killed me and then taken any money I had.'

*You insist that if you had surrendered in UP, the police would have killed you?*

'Killed me, yes. They would have killed me. They shot dead two of Ghanshyam's men who were helping us with negotiations for surrender. The UP police had decided to take me dead only.'

*When did you start thinking of surrendering?*

'After Dadda (Malkhan Singh) surrendered. He is everybody's leader and guru. When he laid down arms, we also decided to surrender to the MP police.'

*Were there any preconditions to your surrender?*

'I don't want to talk about it.'

*You have shown papers listing conditions to newsmen — no hanging, no handcuffing — after your surrender.*

'I would not like to say anything.'

*Did you help villagers wherever you took shelter?*

'Many times.'

*How did you give assistance? Such things never came out although reports about your movements and behaviour were published frequently.*

'How could all this come out? The villagers would have been beaten to pulp by the police.'

*Some people have offered to marry you. One said he is two years younger than you. Otherwise he would have married you.*

'I am twenty. Well, God has given me this face, whatever it is. You know, Naradji prayed to God to give him a beautiful face. God gave him a monkey's face. I am married to Man Singh. One does not get married again and again.'

*Did you go to the cities or towns to see movies or buy clothes?*

'Unimportant women thieves — local Phoolans! — did that. Not me!'

*As well as the Goddess Durga, do you believe in God?*

'Yes, I worship the guru of gods, Brihaspati Dev. I have been worshipping him for some years.'

*So you observe a fast on Thursdays?*

'No, I perform *puja* (a wishful prayer performed before the image of a god) and then have my meals. I do *puja* on three more days — Fridays, Mondays and Wednesdays. It is always when the sun is low in the sky in the afternoon.'

*Do you eat meat?*

'I do. Man Singh doesn't.'

*Are there any things that worry you now?*

'I am worried that my relatives and family are in danger.'

*Have all your relatives come to MP?*

'Not all of them. And my men also have relatives who are in danger. We are trying to get them all to MP.'

*Informers must be a great problem.*

'The villages are full of them. You cannot make a move without someone knowing about it.'

*Have women been good to you?*

'Always. No woman was ever bad to me. Only men have used me brutally. It is because of men that I became a *baghi.*'

After the surrender, Rajendra Chaturvedi came under severe criticism from the Uttar Pradesh authorities, from colleagues in the police force who accused him of violation of service codes of conduct, and from the Indian press. With the criticism of the superintendent came complaints against the Chief Minister, Arjun Singh. One editorial stated:

'The fanfare and publicity which accompanied the surrender of Phoolan Devi and 24 other dacoits at Bhind ... were odious and avoidable. The capture of a woman bandit guilty of heinous crimes, including the massacre of twenty Thakurs in a UP village a year ago, and the virtual elimination of all the major dacoit gangs in the state, are no doubt occasions for relief and rejoicing, but the Chief Minister, Mr Arjun Singh, converted the event into a propaganda prop for his inept and lacklustre government...'

Nevertheless, Chaturvedi was promoted to the position of Superintendent of Gwalior and it was there that he answered two questioners from Delhi.

*It is said that you cornered a lot of publicity during the surrender of Malkhan Singh and Phoolan Devi.*

'On the contrary, I am extremely averse to publicity. I have always said that the credit should go to the entire police force. For instance, in radio messages, I have reported that Malkhan Singh, while on parole, negotiated the surrender of such and such. I have never said that I, Rajendra Chaturvedi, did this or that.'

*Is it true that some are piqued by your success?*

'Some people were interested in preventing the surrender. But I cannot say any more than that.'

*Did the Chief Minister sanction your intrusion into the Jalaun district of UP to bring Phoolan's family to Bhind?*

'How could the CM be involved in the day-to-day work and minute details? It is not part of his business to decide on,

for instance, the security arrangements at a function or the number of policemen to be detailed on a route.'

*But you did enter the Jalaun region without informing your counterparts there?*

'Under the circumstances, it was not possible to inform them. The whole thing was being done discreetly. In any case, we were not doing anything illegal. Phoolan had earlier sent a message to her family asking them to meet her, but they had intimated that it was extremely difficult. We only brought her family to meet Phoolan Devi. We did not bring any criminal. Nor did we commit kidnapping. The family wanted to come.'

*Was bringing the family to Bhind a precondition of the surrender?*

'There were no conditions for the surrender. She only wanted to meet them. And they wanted the chance to come and meet Phoolan. We only gave that chance.'

*Are you claiming that the surrender was unconditional?*

'Yes, except that they were told they would be safe. There were no preconditions.'

*Then what was the sheet of paper from which she was reading out the terms of her surrender after the ceremony?*

'She was probably trying to be one up on us. No paper has been signed. They will face trial. I am positive no conditions were agreed to.'

*A lot of money is alleged to have been paid to policemen by the surrendering gangs.*

'This is nonsense. Totally false.'

*Have you and your force in Bhind been acting on your own? Some reports allege that you act without proper control by the higher authorities.*

'We cannot be a law unto ourselves. We have a Deputy Inspector-General in Gwalior to whom I talk on the telephone five or six times a day. The Inspector-General is extremely happy with our achievements.'

Phoolan's family had been found a room in a house in Gwalior. The cow and the goats were kept just outside. But

her father, Devidin, was dissatisfied. There were problems with the landlord and there was no land. At first, unhappy with the accommodation, Devidin expressed a wish to return to his village, using as an excuse the fact that he was 'an old man — I have not many days to live. I would like to breathe my last in the land of my forefathers.' He grew more frustrated each day, at last angrily telling Moola that he was going back over the border. She told him she would not be going with him. She did not want to be beaten up again. Embittered, Devidin returned to his home village where he immediately accused the MP police of cheating and betraying him. He obtained the services of a letter-writer and despatched communications to government officials and even to Mrs Gandhi, the Prime Minister, asking for their intervention in rescuing his family from the 'clutches of the Gwalior police'. Then, encouraged by state government officials, he made a long statement before a court in Orai, detailing how he and other members of his family were allegedly kidnapped by the MP police. When he resisted attempts by Rajendra Chaturvedi to move him from the village, said Devidin, the superintendent threatened to gun him down. The family were forced to board two jeeps, which had whisked them away. They were treated as guests for four days at the official residence of Mr Chaturvedi and were offered the inducement of a house and land. Following Phoolan's surrender, however, they had been turned out of the house and made captives of the Gwalior police. They were taken to Gwalior and lodged in a room. They were being given four kilograms of wheat flour and half a kilogram of *dahl* a day, while three or four armed police stood guard. Recently, Devidin told the court, his son-in-law, Rukmani's husband, managed to dodge around the police guard and take away his two sons, Mathura and Santosh. He himself managed to escape on the pretext of getting his eyes examined. He had returned to his home village where he was now living in his house. Other members of his family desperately wanted to return to the village, said Devidin, but they were being kept as

hostages by the Gwalior police superintendent.

In Madhya Pradesh, questions were asked about why Devidin had changed his story — at first he had been delighted to be able to cross the border but now he was making grave accusations. Had coercion been used to make him go to the Orai court?

Despite the surrenders, the Uttar Pradesh police did not withdraw ravine patrols. To have ceased operations would have acknowledged that the Madhya Pradesh police had cleared up the dacoit problem. In Lucknow, it was decided that even if there was not a single bandit left in the gorges, patrols had to be maintained to give the appearance that a problem still existed — a sudden change of policy from earlier days when the authorities had tried to give the impression that dacoits were being eliminated every day and the danger was lessening. Now it had to be seen that the capture of Phoolan Devi was unimportant: there were far more vicious gangs on the prowl. Ironically, the UP police now listed as one of their greatest enemies Phoolan's former gang member, Vishnu, who had not wanted to surrender with her. He was now running with three other dacoits and leaving behind a trail of crime. In the first week of April 1983 he kidnapped Kailash Narain, a Bewar businessman, and dragged him off into the Harsuri jungle. Dozens of UP patrols chased them but Vishnu and the gang managed to escape into another jungle at Jamhori where, abandoning the terrified captive, they were engaged in a running battle with police for 24 hours. It came as no surprise to Phoolan Devi to hear that Vishnu and his three associates had been 'killed in an encounter with the UP police'.

She began to loathe the confines of jail. Malkhan Singh had been allowed out on parole from time time to help negotiate the surrender of smaller dacoit gangs, but she realised there could be no such concessions for her because of the seriousness of the crime at Behmai.

And she was feeling ill again. A prison doctor examined her and decided she would have to have an operation for the

removal of an ovarian cyst. A blood sample was necessary, but she threw up her hands and refused. She did not trust anyone — how did she know they would not take out more blood than was needed?

Ghanshyam, too, hated the restrictions of prison life. One afternoon in May he approached Phoolan and said simply, 'Goodbye. Perhaps we will meet in the ravines again one day.'

She saw nothing significant in his words, believing he was moving to another part of the jail. But on that same day, Mr S. D. Sharma, the circle inspector of Behat, in the Gwalior district, appeared before Special Judge M. P. Vajpayee and applied for bail for Ghanshyam and his brother Karan Singh. Sharma told the judge that guns, needed as evidence in a case of attempted murder, had to be recovered from Gudhajaitpura village, and Ghanshyam would be able to help. The application was granted, whereas an earlier attempt to get the brothers out on parole had failed. That same evening, Sharma called at Gwalior Jail, collected Ghanshyam and Karan Singh, and placed them in the custody of Sub-Inspector Indradeo Chauhan, who was in charge of a head constable and four constables.

Ghanshyam and his brother were delighted. For by some remarkable coincidence, which was to be the subject of heated controversy later, two of their nieces were to be married that night at Gudhajaitpura. At seven-thirty in the evening the brothers, who were neither handcuffed nor roped, set off with their escorts for the village, reaching their destination at eleven. Gudhajaitpura, a large village of 3,000 inhabitants, had given shelter to the dacoits on several occasions and now the villagers greeted their return by firing dozens of rounds into the air. There was dancing and music and plenty of food and the police joined in the festivities. The marriage celebrations continued until three o'clock when Ghanshyam and his brother announced that they were tired and needed a good night's sleep. Their friend Shyam Saran Singh, the village head man, put them up at his house and at nine the brothers rose and spent the morning bathing and visiting the local temple. In the afternoon, Karan asked the

police to leave them in peace for a while so they could have a chat with their relatives about family matters. The officers moved off. At six o'clock Karan went to the fields, ostensibly to relieve himself. Ghanshyam followed shortly afterwards. That was the last the police saw of them.

Immediately the news leaked out, Rajendra Chaturvedi was faced with a barrage of questions, the first of which was whether Ghanshyam and his brother had really been needed for arms recovery.

'Of course. That was the purpose, but Ghanshyam concealed the fact that his nieces were to be married in the same village.'

The superintendent argued Ghanshyam fled because his relatives told him that the police continued to harass his family, although he had surrendered. This probably angered the former dacoit chief, who saw himself as the cause of his family's troubles. Chaturvedi pointed out that following complaints from the brothers about the harassment of their parents he sent several messages to the UP police, but not one was acknowledged.

The police officer's explanations were unconvincing. His critics asked why the police suddenly decided to search for arms on the day of the wedding. And why did the search take place after Ghanshyam had been in jail for 100 days? Was there something significant in the 100 days' detention? Most importantly, if the reason for asking for a release from jail was a search for arms, why wasn't that search carried out? The six policemen who had accompanied the dacoits were, of course, suspended, but they were beginning to look like scapegoats. One of them said bitterly, 'If we had been permitted to treat them as common criminals, they would never have escaped. But we had to treat them as very important persons. We could not handcuff them, rope them, direct them or point our guns at them. So how could we prevent their running off?'

'Don't worry,' said Ayodhyanath Pathak, Deputy Inspector-General of the Gwalior range, 'we will catch them. If we can catch Phoolan Devi, we can catch anybody.'

# Epilogue

The magnificent guest-house attached to the royal palace at Gwalior has been converted into hotel accommodation and from its verandahs you can see the dried-up moat and the overgrown pleasure pavilion. It is a forlorn view. The monkeys that once chattered in the nearby forest have gone, but peacocks still strut through the grounds. Overhead, vultures glide to the treetops and perch, watching.

Beyond the hotel boundary wall, the enormous palace with its curious blend of architectural styles is under attack from spreading mould, and the opulent rooms containing glorious artefacts from past eras have been closed to visitors. There is a domestic dispute in the family; the Queen Mother supports a different political party from that of her son and she has taken up residence in Delhi, leaving him to live with the mirrors, brocades and gildings which it has become too costly to maintain.

A sadness hangs over the parks and gardens, where a handful of village women have been employed to brush the paths and keep general order. They squat on the hotel lawns and cut handfuls of grass with tiny knives while it grows up again behind them.

Decaying are the memories of a time when elephants carried royalty with solemn majesty through the city of stone lacework, and ladies in painted muslins took the air on trellised balconies.

But the local tourist authority tries to call back the ghosts with organised tours to the white-marbled mausoleums of

Maharajahs past. Guides retell legends, remembering in particular the story of the Rani of Jhansi's ride against the British.

The jail which holds the Bandit Queen, who is hailed by village women as a freedom fighter, is not on the list of places of interest. The tourist authority has been officially instructed not to mention her.

On the patio at the royal guest-house, a businessman down from Delhi for a few days is startled to read in a newspaper that a woman bandit, dressed in khaki with a scarf around her head and calling herself Phoolan Devi, has been plundering villages in Bundelkhand.

'What is this?' asks the astonished visitor of a waiter. 'I thought this woman was in jail in Gwalior.'

'Yes sir,' he is told. 'This is another woman dacoit. An imposter using her name. There will only be one Phoolan Devi.'

Richard Shears has been a journalist for 25 years. Twelve of those he spent in Fleet Street, first as Deputy Foreign Editor of the former *Daily Sketch*, then with the *Daily Mail*. He has covered stories all over the world for the *Mail*, obtaining exclusive interviews with a variety of people from royalty to members of the I.R.A. and primitive New Guinea tribesmen. Richard could well be 'the fastest pen in the west' – his book *Azaria*, the story of Australia's famous dingo baby case, made publishing history when it reached the bookshops just three days after the trial ended.

It was while he was covering the Coconut War that he met his nemesis, Isobelle Gidley, a great grand-daughter of a cannibal chief. Fortunately Isobelle had been a practising vegetarian for years and had learned to control her ancestral urges. Since leaving Paradise, Isobelle has been a barrister, a singer, an actress, a producer, a poet and an insatiable adventurer.

In the last three years Richard and Isobelle have written 10 books between them. They went to India to research this book and were able to interview Devi (through an intermediary) in prison, and to visit the wild and remote regions where she and her gang operated.

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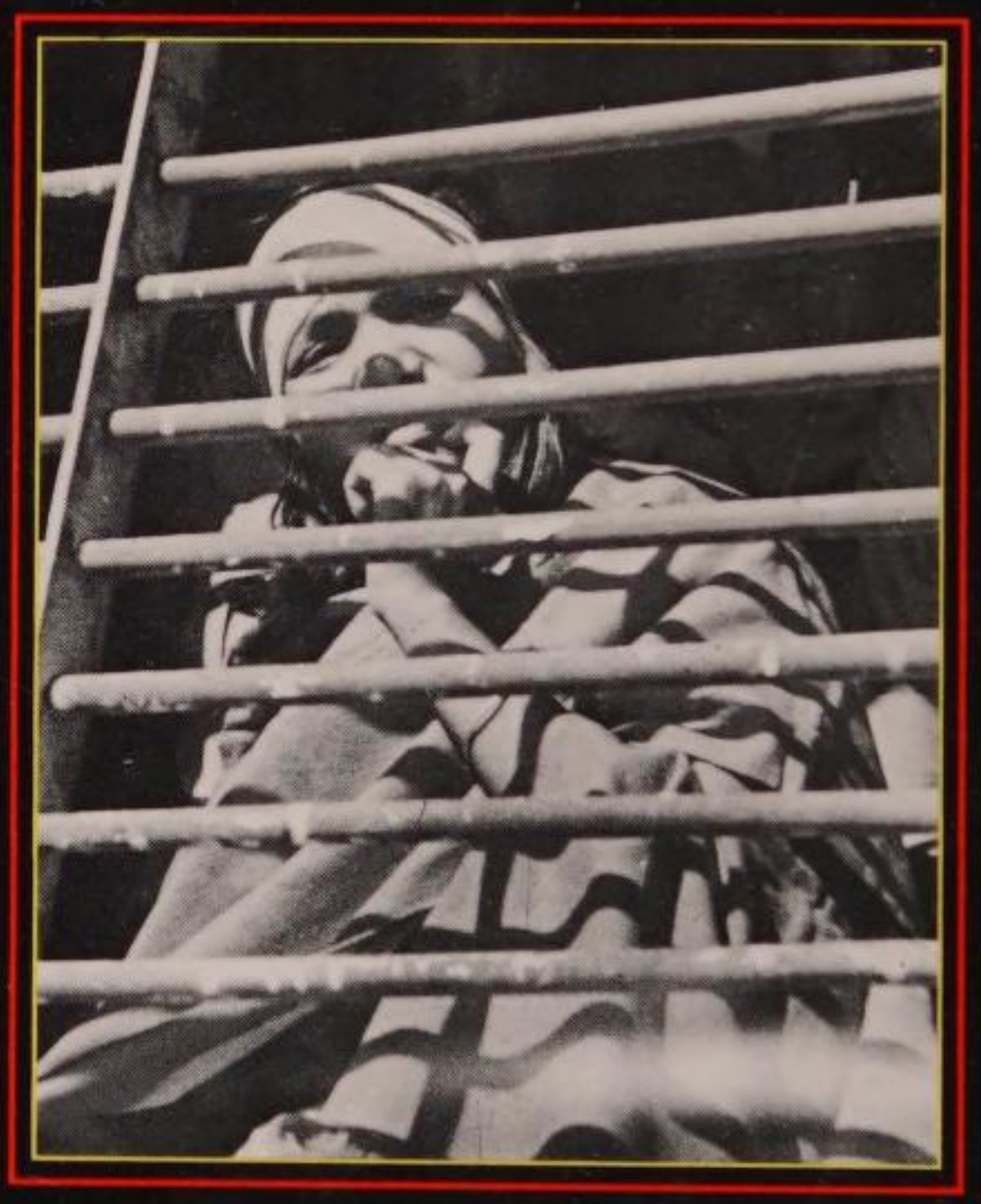
U.K. ISBN 0 04 9200976
AUSTRALIAN ISBN 0 86861 418 1